

Space: 2299



OS: Dragon's Domain

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An encounter with a derelict space station and a spacecraft long believed lost offers the inhabitants of the moon the chance to increase their resources. However, they are not the first visitors to have attempted to plunder the station's secrets and they must fight to avoid the same fate as all the others who came before them...

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I.

Colonel John Koenig looked up from his desk as a young woman in plain overalls walked up the steps from main mission to his office in the company of an armed soldier.

"Keynes, sit down." he told her, pointing to a chair on the other side of his desk as he also activated the control to close the wall separating his office from main mission so that they could talk privately.

"Thank you colonel." Keynes replied, sitting down while the soldier handed Koenig a memory stick and then took a position standing behind Keynes where he could watch her, "My report is on there." she said and Koenig plugged the memory stick into his computer. As Keynes had said there was a report document contained on the device and Koenig opened it up. Normally reports compiled by his subordinates would be sent to him via electronic messaging or placed on a server where he could access it. However, Keynes was a special case. A former member of the Global Defence Force, she had assisted the terrorist group that had attacked the nuclear weapon storage facility at Moonbase Mu, the destruction of which had opened the wormhole that subsequently pulled the moon out of Earth's orbit and began its random travelling through space. A plea deal that required her to continue to carry out a logistics function at Moonbase Alpha had kept her out of prison but her freedom on the moon was limited. One limitation was that she was denied any access to networked computer equipment.

"Excellent." Koenig said as he glanced at the report. Keynes had always shown great talent for logistical matters and Koenig had been keen to have her look over all the competing reports he had received on the status of the moon's settlements and resources, "So what's your overall opinion?"

"You're current plan is to supplement the fresh food produced at Iota with rations from our war reserve stocks." Keynes said and Koenig nodded.

"Yes, we can't grow enough to feed everyone at the moment. Major Capston's engineers are going to be expanding the farms as we can but we need soil and seed." he responded.

"Well I can't help you with the soil but you're overlooking an obvious source of seed." Keynes said and Koenig looked at her, "The food." she added, "If you take everything that's grown in the farms and put it back into the system then you'll have your source of fresh seed."

"That will deplete our reserves faster." Koenig pointed out and Keynes nodded.

"Yes, I know that but the benefits of being able to get new farms up and running will be worth it." she said.

"People might not be happy about being told to eat only emergency rations either." Koenig added.

"No but there'll always be some fresh food available from the independent farming units. Let them carry on as they have been and selling their produce on the open market. I'm sure the private farmers will be happy about it."

"Of course." Koenig interrupted, "They'll be able to charge more."

"Exactly. Supply and demand. Of course once we get the expanded farms up and running the prices will come back down again. In the meantime the various sheriffs' offices near all the farms should be reinforced with military personnel. Inevitably you're going to get people trying to get at the fresh food as it becomes scarce." Keynes said.

"Okay, now moving away from food supply what about the other issues?" Koenig asked.

"I don't see any quick way around the problem of parts for Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi's Hawks. The construction jigs will have to be made from scratch and then calibrated. That's going to be trial and error for the time being. I think that we'll be better off expanding our Eagle fleet and arming as many of the ships as we can. Of course this will be competing for resources with your program to install surface defences at all the bases just in case the Dorcons or any other aliens we happen to run into attack again but that can't be avoided. The fixed defences will be better for morale and we have a reasonable defensive fleet for now so I'd suggest giving the fixed defences priority."

"I'm glad you're taking morale into consideration. That seems pretty low right now. You know that word is going round that our being forced out of Earth's orbit and getting stranded in deep space is the fault of the GDF?" Koenig said and Keynes nodded slowly.

"Yes colonel and I know that you making a deal with me hasn't helped." Keynes said, "Even the others aren't happy about it." and she glanced at the wall dividing the office from main mission.

"Still being given the cold shoulder then?" Koenig asked.

"Yes colonel. I get why Baker's so angry at me but I thought that at least Tanya Alexander would be willing to give me the time of day. We were best friends for a long time but now even she barely acknowledges me. I thought maybe coming back to work would mean that I'd at least be around people but I'm basically working under guard in a broom cupboard to keep me away from network access." Keynes answered and then the intercom on Koenig's desk activated.

"Colonel Koenig." a woman's voice said.

"Yes Spacewoman Baker?" Koenig responded.

"Colonel, Major Capston is here with a Mister Foxworth to see you." Baker said and Koenig sighed.

"Okay, send them up." he said before turning off the intercom.

"Foxworth? I don't know that name." Keynes said.

"Some big shot lawyer from Earth. He was on vacation with his family at Kappa when we were sent out of orbit. Now he's trying to put together some sort of civilian government to take control of the moon." Koenig told her.

"With him at the top, right?"

"Right. But he's getting support from a few base administrators and journalists. Capston is the first military officer that he's approached as far as I know though. Now if you don't mind I need to deal with this. I'll read your report and get back to you." Koenig said and he opened the wall of his office once more just as Capston and a man in an expensive looking suit were being led up the steps by Baker.

"Yes colonel." Keynes said as she got up and as she was leaving the office Baker led Capston and Foxworth into it.

"Hello Baker." Keynes said and the young woman glared at her.

"It's Spacewoman Baker." she said before turning to Koenig and smiling as she announced his two new guests, "Major Capston and Mister Foxworth sir."

"Thank you Spacewoman Baker. Please see Miss Keynes out of main mission." Koenig replied.

"Glad to. Back to the closet." Baker replied before turning around and walking just behind Keynes while she descended the steps and looked around at the command staff. As they had done each time she had entered main mission since being let out of prison the people she had worked with for years now avoided making eye contact with her at all, instead focusing on their work stations.

"Colonel." one of the other officers in main mission said before Koenig could close the wall again. This was Morrow, Alpha's executive officer.

"Yes major?" Koenig asked.

"Professor Bergman has readjusted his calculations for when we'll enter the wormhole again." Morrow said.

"How long do we have?"

"The professor estimates that we will now enter the wormhole in eight to ten minutes. All stations have already reported secure."

"Very good major. Let me know if there are any further updates." Koenig replied before he closed the wall again, "Gentlemen, please sit down. I'd like to keep this brief if we can. What can I do for you?"

"Colonel Koenig, Mister Foxworth has approached me with an alternative action plan that I think you ought to hear." Capston replied.

"An alternative plan? Exactly what alternative is there to making ourselves self sufficient and doing our best to understand the way the wormholes work so that we can return to Earth?" Koenig replied.

"Getting everyone on the moon back to Earth is an admirable aim colonel, but not only does it have the appearance of trying to undo the GDF's mistakes-" Foxworth began.

"Mistakes?" Koenig interrupted, "What are these mistakes exactly Mister Foxworth?"

"Come now colonel, surely you have to admit that if the GDF had not been pursuing a secret program to develop weapons of mass destruction then we would not be in this situation. Foxworth said.

Koenig considered pointing out to the man that the program to create nuclear weapons for use in the expected military conflict between Earth and the colonies in the solar system beyond the moon had been decided upon by the elected government of Earth but decided not to get into that argument. Instead he would find out exactly what Foxworth's aims were.

"So what is it that you would have me do Mister Foxworth?" he said.

"We know that there are other planets out here that are capable of supporting human life colonel. We have already encountered two of them after all. The Citizens' Committee has decided that it is in the best interests if we prepare ourselves to relocate to one of these." Foxworth said.

"The Citizens' Committee?" Koenig commented.

"Yes, that is the body formed to represent the moon's civilian population that I have been elected to chair. As the highest civilian authority on the moon-" Foxworth began.

"I'll stop you there Mister Foxworth." Koenig said, holding up his hand, "Your Citizens' Committee has no authority at all. I let you in here out of courtesy, not obligation. The legal structure of the moon makes it clear that if contact with Earth is cut off command falls to the ranking military officer. In other words, me.

Regardless of that evacuating the moon is impractical. According to Professor Bergman we will never spend enough time in one system to be able to fully evacuate the moon's population as well as all the supplies and equipment we would need to settle on another planet."

"Maybe not now, but as I understand it Professor Bergman is in the process of designing a shield that can be constructed over the remains of Moonbase Mu to control the flow of radioactive particles that pulls us into the wormholes. Once this is complete our length of stay in a system can be extended, perhaps our position can

even be made permanent by cutting off the particles entirely." Foxworth said and all of a sudden Koenig understood why he had approached Major Capston. The major commanded the construction teams that would have to build the shield once Bergman had finalised his design and so had been regularly liaising with the professor.

"If we dedicate my entire engineering force to the project then we should be able to have the shield in place in just a few months. Perhaps six at the outside." Capston said.

"Of course this schedule cannot be kept if Major Capston's people are also being called upon to expand subsurface farming settlements that we will be abandoning anyway." Foxworth added.

"Mister Foxworth, settling permanently on an alien world carries too many risks. There may be problems with an environment that are not apparent immediately and then there is the risk of attack by the Dorcons or any other hostile species that might be nearby. My decision stands, we will continue to allow the moon to pass through the wormholes while we attempt to develop the means to return to Earth."

"Colonel I must warn you that the Citizens' Committee will not look kindly on its proposal being rejected out of hand. They may be forced to ask you to step down." Foxworth said and Koenig stared at him.

"Ask me to step down?" he said.

"That's right. If you will not do your duty to the civilian population then-" Foxworth began but Koenig was not listening any more. Instead he opened the wall off his office again and got to his feet.

"Master Sergeant Washington." he called out and an enlisted man sat at the security station got to his feet.

"Yes colonel?" he asked.

"Mister Foxworth is returning to Kappa. Please escort him to the travel tube station." Koenig ordered and Washington smiled.

"Gladly colonel." he said before waving to a guard standing just inside main mission and the two men made their way up the steps to Koenig's office.

"If that is your answer Colonel Koenig I'll go." Foxworth said, getting to his feet before the guards arrived to remove him, "But I should warn you that you do not have enough support on the moon to appoint yourself as a military dictator and it would be in your best interests to cede authority to a civilian government."

"Colonel we'll be entering the wormhole in sixty seconds." one of the officers in main mission announced and Koenig nodded at her.

"Thank you Benes." he said before turning to a second woman officer, "Lieutenant Alexander are we secure?"

"All traffic grounded and ready for the transition colonel." she replied.

"Here we go." another officer said in his Australian accent while the big screen that dominated the far wall of main mission showed the wormhole expanding as the moon was being drawn into it once more.

There was a flash of light when the moon crossed the event horizon into the wormhole and was transported almost instantly across space to emerge at what had been a Lagrangian Point between two large objects in space where their gravitational pulls cancelled one another out. The inhabitants of the moon had encountered aliens who were able to safely navigate their passage through wormholes so that they would emerge where they wanted to but the haphazard nature of the moon's travel meant that it moved randomly through space and as soon as it arrived at its destination the staff at main mission immediately began to assess their new surroundings.

"Looks like we've come out near a rocky planet colonel. We're caught between it and a moon." Benes announced.

"Habitable?" Koenig asked but Benes shook her head.

"I doubt it from these readings colonel, it looks more like Venus than Earth or Mars. Even our Eagles wouldn't last long in that atmosphere." she said.

"Err colonel." Alexander said and Koenig looked at her again.

"Yes lieutenant?" he asked.

"Colonel I'm picking up a transponder. A GDF transponder." Alexander said.

"You must be picking up something coming from the moon then. A reflection." the Australian officer said.

"Carter's right." Morrow added, "We can't be back in our own system. Venus doesn't have any moons so no matter how similar it may be the planet we're orbiting isn't it."

"Major I know what I'm seeing here and this transponder signal is coming from a point about twenty light minutes away." Alexander said.

"Alexander's right." Benes agreed, "The computer is registering the transponder."

"Does that mean you have an ID?" Koenig asked.

"I'm not sure colonel." Alexander said, looking at the console in front of her, "It's obviously a GDF call sign but the serial number itself doesn't look right."

"Let me see." Carter said, bringing up a copy of the signal Alexander was looking at on his own console and he grinned, "I take it back lieutenant, that is a genuine GDF transponder and it's not coming from the moon."

"Told you." Benes commented.

"Would someone mind letting me in on what's going on?" Koenig said, "I am supposed to be in command around here after all, no matter what your lawyer friend has to say Capston." and he glanced over his shoulder to where Capston still stood.

"It's out of date." Carter said, "That transponder is about forty or fifty years old."

"Could it be from one of the sub-light probes launched to systems close to Earth?" Baker suggested, "Maybe we're not far from home."

"No, this is a military transponder." Carter said.

"Benes run it through the computer. See if you can get a match against our records." Koenig ordered, "Are we facing the source?"

"Yes colonel but its too far away for our sensors to get any detailed readings

, "Baker, get me Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi."

"Yes colonel, putting you through now." Baker responded and Koenig hurried back to his desk, leaving the wall between his office and main mission open so that he could see what was happening.

"Yes colonel?" the commander of Moonbase Epsilon said when his face appeared on the monitor in front of Koenig.

"Colonel Verdeschi we're picking up a GDF transponder in this system." Koenig told him and Verdeschi frowned.

"How is that possible?" he asked.

"I don't know. According to Carter it's decades out of date so I've got Benes running it through the computer right now to try and get a positive ID. I want you to align Epsilon's targeting sensors on the source and get us a better picture. It might help if we could see the ship." Koenig told him.

2.

Unlike Moonbase Alpha that was a small city mixing military and civilian roles, Moonbase Epsilon was purely a military facility that housed not only the fleet of Hawk attack ships based on the moon but was also armed with a large number of missiles that could be fired at targets over interplanetary distances. This required the base to be equipped with sensor systems capable of acquiring and locking on to such targets.

"I want our sensors aligned on this heading." Verdeschi ordered his command staff, "As soon as you have the transponder I want a sensor sweep of the entire EM spectrum. Make sure everything is passed to Alpha." "Aligning targeting sensors now colonel." one of his officers said, "We have a lock on the transponder."

"Colonel we have a visual but something's not right about this." another officer added.

"Why? What's wrong?" Verdeschi asked.

"Well if the range calculated from the lunar traffic control system is right then the object we're looking at is over two thousand metres across." the officer told him.

"That's bigger than anything we've ever built." Verdeschi said and he reached out to engage the communication system on the console he was stood beside, "Alpha are you seeing this?" he asked.

"You mean the little white blob?" Koenig said, looking closely at the big screen and the small shape in the centre that was surrounded by empty space.

"Yes, whatever that blob is it's two kilometres across." Verdeschi said.

"Then it can't be one of our ships." Koenig said, "Perhaps it's an asteroid and the ship crashed into it."

"If it is then the entire asteroid is made of metal. We've got readings on our magnetic resonance scanners that indicate it's a ship."

"Colonel computer has a match for the transponder." Benes announced suddenly and Koenig looked at her.

"So what ship is it?" he asked.

"It's the *Ultra*. Lead ship of the Ultra-class patrol ships. Reported missing February twenty-two forty six. It was last reported operating in the region of Jupiter and the GDF report into its disappearance suggests that it may have suffered a reactor meltdown and the wreckage fallen into Jupiter." Benes said.

"We're a long way from Jupiter." Morrow commented.

"Yes and Ultra-class ships weren't two kilometres long. They were less than three hundred metres, smaller than an Anderson-class frigate." Carter added.

"Weren't the Ultra-class equipped to be carriers like the Anderson-class?" Morrow said, looking at Carter.

"They sure were." he replied, nodding, "Of course they didn't have Hawks back then but they carried Vultures docked in the same way as well as a couple of Swifts for scouting."

"Colonel if those ships are still attached then they could be useful to us." another of the officers present suggested, "They may be old but our resources are limited and they would-"

"No need to explain further Kano. Yes they could be useful." Koenig said, "Okay we have an ID and we have a visual scan. I want all this passed to Professor Bergman along with specifications of the Ultra-class, perhaps he can figure out how that ship got here. Major Carter, I want you and Lieutenant Alexander to start planning a salvage operation. I want to know how long it will take us to get to that ship and what you think we can bring back before we get pulled back into that wormhole. Kano and Benes take all the data that Epsilon is feeding us and do whatever you can to enhance that image. Capston you get back to your assignment and for the love of God stay away from that fool Foxworth and his friends. Morrow you have command. I'll be in my quarters if you need me though I'll be stopping by the medical section on my way."

Koenig held a small bunch of flowers as he entered Alpha's medical section and he smiled at Doctor Helena Russell as he walked into her office and held them up in front of her.

"Why John I had no idea you were so cheap." Russell said as she looked at the flowers.

"Cheap? These are getting pricey Helena." he said, "It won't be long before I won't be able to buy you any real flowers. All the commercial gardening space will be shifting to growing crops."

"I guess we can't eat flowers." Russell replied as she took the flowers, "Well I better get them in water to try and make them last then."

"So Helena, are you free for some lunch? We may need to make the most of real food while we can." Koenig said and Russell frowned.

"What's happening with the food John?" she asked, "I should be consulted if we need to start coming up with a ration plan."

"Oh it's nothing like that. Alyson Keynes just thought it would be a good idea for us to switch entirely to combat rations while we expand our farms. The extra seed will make it easier to bring us up to full self sufficiency."

"So she's given you her report then?" Russell said.

"Yes she has and it seems you were right about the reaction of the others to her being back at work. None of them want anything to do with her. I've had her working in a converted storeroom but I'm not sure how long that can be kept up. She may as well still be in an isolation cell at Theta. So go ahead and tell me that you told me so."

"It's no fun when you ask me to John. Now what about this food? I'm over due for a break we've had a hectic morning." Russell said.

"Really? Anything I need to be aware of?"

"Oh nothing new. We're not looking at any sort of contagion if that's what you're worried about but I've had a number of GDF personnel in with minor injuries that I needed to do full reports on. Someone out there is still whipping up anti GDF sentiment and some people are even attacking anyone they see in one of our uniforms. You know Lieutenant Alexander's boyfriend broke up with her yesterday because he didn't want to be associated with a GDF officer?"

Koenig sighed.

"No, I didn't know that. If this carries on I might just have to ban everyone from wearing their uniforms off duty and ordering them to carry weapons." he said, "But that can wait while I try to calm things down. Right now I'm hungry."

Koenig and Russell returned to the quarters they shared to eat and made a point of picking fresh food items rather than food that could be preserved long term. While they prepared their food and then sat down to eat it Koenig turned on the television set, muting it as they sat down to eat but leaving it on in the background. The moon had a small number of television channels based there and some of these had continued to operate in the aftermath of leaving Earth's orbit. Those dependent on programming brought in from Earth had cut back their operations drastically but there was still a need for the media to entertain and inform the tens of thousands of people on the moon and so the other channels kept going. The channel Koenig had set the television to was a news channel that was now dominated by the changes happening as a result of the moon being dragged through wormholes. Most of the command staff of Alpha as well as other bases had been approached for interviews by this channel but so far neither Koenig or any of his staff had accepted the offer. However, as Koenig and Russell were just finishing their meal he saw a familiar face appear on the screen and he realised that Foxworth obviously had decided to give an interview.

"Oh great, that moron." Koenig said when he noticed Foxworth.

"Who?" Russell asked as she looked up.

"Him. He's called Foxworth, he's a lawyer who has had himself appointed as the legitimate leader of the moon by a group calling itself the Citizens' Committee. He came to see me today with a plan about how we should all leave the moon as soon as the first reasonably habitable planet comes into view." Koenig told her.

"I can see how that might appeal to some of the civilian population. The chance to go outside without needing a spacesuit sounds good." Russell commented.

"Civilians I'm not worried about. The problem is that he's reaching out to members of the military as well. I think Capston might support him, he was with him this morning." Koenig replied.

"Capston? But he's in charge of adapting the moon to travelling through space." Russell said, surprised.

"I know. Foxworth thinks that all that is a waste of time. I had him removed from main mission but I get the feeling that he's going to keep pushing the matter."

"Perhaps it's time you got a new adjutant to replace Alyson Keynes. Ideally one that doesn't have a crush on you." Russell said.

"I suppose I could send an adjutant to meetings I don't want to attend, with both civilians and military subordinates." Koenig said, nodding slowly, "They could tell them what I intend to do and then pretend to be sympathetic to their demands. For civilians of course. For the military I want someone willing to whip people into line."

"Tanya Alexander perhaps." Russell said, "Your adjutant really should be a captain and I'm sure she'd appreciate the promotion if you decided to make her one."

"Well she can provide her own whip and knows how to use it." Koenig said and he hesitated briefly before adding, "Or so the rumours say."

"I heard it was more of a crop than a whip. But I don't dare ask just case she offers to demonstrate it on me." Russell said, miming the use of a crop to beat someone.

"Likewise. But she can whip that fool any time with my blessing." Koenig said, nodding towards the image of Foxworth.

"Really? Then let me hear what he has to say that riles you so much." Russell said and before Koenig could argue she picked up the control to the television and turned the sound back on.

"Colonel Koenig was not willing to listen to any viewpoint except his own and as a result of this the Citizens' Committee will be debating whether we still have confidence in his ability to hold the office he has assumed."

Foxworth said while the journalist held a microphone towards him. Koenig was about to try and take the control from Russell so he could shut the television off entirely but before he could take hold of it his comlock sounded.

"It never rains." Koenig muttered as he lifted the device to his ear, "Koenig." he said.

"Colonel it's Morrow."

"Major, if this I about Foxworth then-" Koenig began.

"No colonel." Morrow interrupted, "We have the results of the image enhancement you ordered run on the sensor readings of the *Ultra* and they're interesting. I think you should take a look at them and I think we should bring in the professor and Maya as well."

This last comment grabbed Koenig's attention. Maya was an alien, the result of genetic experimentation on humans conducted by the species that had attack Earth during the twenty-second century. This experimentation had produced a species now known as Psychons that was divided along gender lines. The males were highly technical while the females were empathic and could rapidly master alternate forms of communication they were exposed to. In some cases, such as Maya, their empathic abilities went as far as being able to influence others to do whatever they were commanded. Her people were slaves of the reptilian Dorcons and she had opted to remain on the moon as an advisor after being rescued from them by Koenig. If Morrow was suggesting that Maya be brought in on the issue then it suggested that something alien had been encountered.

"Okay have everyone meet in main mission in ten minutes. I'm on my way to see what you've found. Koenig out." Koenig said and he turned off his comlock and put it down, "Did you hear that?" he then asked Russell and she nodded.

"Go. We're done eating." she said.

"Actually I'd like you to come along as well. If Morrow thinks Maya should be involved then we're probably dealing with something alien and I'd value your medical input." Koenig replied.

3.

"Okay let's see what you found." Koenig said as soon as he and Russell entered main mission and as the pair of them moved towards the centre of the room Alexander called up the image recorded of the *Ultra* on the big screen, now enhanced so that every detail of the craft was shown clearly. The forward section of the ship looked like an oversized version of the cockpit module used on many types of human spacecraft and behind this the hull widened as it led to a module with a hexagonal cross section and featured an external framework on each side running the module's full length as well as several weapon batteries. The ship's hull then tapered to a relatively long and narrow tail on which were mounted the docking ports for Vulture gunships led to the drive section at the rear that flared out widely again in a rounded cone that had numerous engine modules evenly spaced around it.

"My God." Russell said, halting when she saw it, "John look at them."

"That was pretty much my reaction when I saw them." Carter commented.

The image of the *Ultra* showed the vessel to be intact and a pair of Vultures could still be seen fixed to the mounting points on its tail. But it was not the *Ultra* itself that attracted the attention of the command staff looking at the image, instead it was the myriad of other spacecraft that were all connected together via a large space station. Neither the station nor any of the ships other than the *Ultra* docked to it looked as if they had been built by humans.

"You may notice that there's a Dorcon warship there." Morrow commented, pointing to a vessel identical to one of the large warships that had attacked the moon shortly after it had left the solar system.

"And at least a dozen more built by species completely unknown to us." Koenig added.

"Colonel you asked to see us?" a man in civilian clothing asked from the entrance to main mission and Koenig looked around to see Professor Bergman and Maya there.

"Ah yes. Professor, Maya, I'd like your opinions on that." he said, pointing at the big screen.

"Goodness." Bergman said, "That is amazing. Have they contacted us?"

"We've not picked anything up from them yet." Alexander said, "But they won't have seen us until twenty minutes after we arrived and it would take another twenty for a signal to get here. That leaves only a short window for them to figure out what they want to say."

"And what about us? Have we tried to say 'hello'?" Russell asked.

"No, we contacted Colonel Koenig as soon as the enhancement was complete." Morrow answered.

"Maya." Koenig said, turning to the young woman who in poor light could easily pass for human. As it was only her exceptionally pale eyes, angled eyebrows and prominent widow's peak made her stand out.

"Yes Colonel Koenig?" she asked in reply.

"Do any of those ships look familiar to you?"

"Yes colonel. One is obviously a Dorcon warship and I once saw a vessel of that type that had been taken as a prize by the forces of Lord Kollus." Maya told him and then she pointed at the big screen and added, "That one, the blue vessel to the left of the image."

"What sort of ship is it?" Carter asked.

"A cargo vessel. Lord Kollus said that the contents of the vessel his troops captured were very valuable and made a significant contribution towards the tribute he promised his superiors in exchange for his rank." Maya said.

"Colonel these ships offer us a significant opportunity." Kano said, "We know that the Dorcons can navigate their way through wormholes so that technology must be aboard it somewhere. If we could find it or at least their main computer then perhaps we can reverse engineer it."

"Same goes for the other ships." Carter added, "There are no signs that this system is inhabited so all those ships must have come through wormholes to get here."

"What about their crews? Are there any signs that there are people alive on any of those ships?" Russell said.

"Do you think that the crew of the *Ultra* could have survived all this time?" Benes said.

"Not without supplies from somewhere else." Kano told her.

"Kano's right. An *Ultra*-class ship had a crew of about forty and food, fuel and air for two years. The crew probably died a long time ago." Carter added, "Even if they could get more supplies from that space station there's still the problem of how the ship got here. At its maximum practical speed it would take longer to reach Alpha Centauri in that ship than has passed since it disappeared."

"Actually I think I may have an answer for that." Bergman said and he walked closer to the big screen to point at the rear section of the *Ultra* in the image, "You see this flared section here, this is part of the drive system of the *Ultra*-class, a very interesting system if you ask me. You see this type of ship has two totally different types of space drive."

"Yes, it had a regular fusion drive like our Eagles and Hawks still use but the role of the Ultra-class was to patrol the system looking for any fresh signs of alien incursion so they were built to run silent. To eliminate the delay in bringing their reactor up to full power the ships were also fitted with an Orion drive so that they could get moving quickly." Carter said.

"There's nothing more powerful than an Orion drive and it needs no warm up time." Kano said, then he smiled and added, "At least according to what we know. There could be something better on one of those alien ships out there."

"What is an Orion drive?" Maya asked.

"It works by hurling a nuclear bomb out of the back of the ship. When the bomb goes off that big cone shaped shield assembly absorbs the energy of the blast and the ship is propelled forwards at terrific speed." Carter said, "Not very cost effective compared to a fusion drive but it gets the job done." Carter explained.

"The technology was abandoned when the Ultras were phased out." Kano added.

"At least until Earth decided to start making nuclear weapons again. The program used a number of left over propulsion devices and the equipment used for making them to give us a head start." Koenig said. Then a thought occurred to him, "You know if there are any of those propulsion charges left then they would make pretty good bombs." he added.

"You mean strap them to the top of a missile or load them onto an Eagle?" Carter asked and Koenig nodded. "Exactly major." he replied.

"Yes well I believe that it was the Orion drive that is the cause of the Ultra's disappearance from our solar system." Bergman said, "I think that the crew of the Ultra used their Orion drive at a Lagrange point."

Koenig winced.

"They triggered a nuke and opened a wormhole by accident. It sucked them in and brought them here." he said.

"Precisely colonel. I doubt the crew would have had any idea of what had happened or why. Even if they did manage to figure it out and tried to open a wormhole deliberately they couldn't have navigated it. They would have been reduced to jumping at random through space like we are." Bergman continued and Koenig turned to Carter.

"How are your plans for a recovery mission going major?" he asked.

"An Eagle can make it to the *Ultra* in under four hours, so that's an eight hour round trip. The Vultures docked to her are about as fast as our Eagles so if they are functional and have enough fuel for the trip back then getting them back here should just be a matter of putting a pilot aboard them I'd need to know how long we have before the moon gets dragged back into the wormhole to give you an accurate opinion of whether we can make the trip in time though." Carter said.

"Professor, how long do you think we have?" Koenig asked.

"Well my calculations are still subject to being perfected but I think it's safe to say that we have at least eighteen hours before the wormhole pulls us in again." Bergman answered.

"So an eight hour round trip and I'd like the salvage team to have a good eight hours to do their job. That means we've got two hours to organise it people. Get moving." Koenig ordered.

Carter sat in Koenig's office with him to discuss the mission to investigate the *Ultra* and as many of the alien ships as possible during the time frame available to them. The office wall had been left open to main mission so that either Koenig or Carter could communicate directly if they needed anything from the other command staff while Verdeschi's face was shown on a wall mounted monitor.

"I can certainly provide a pair of Hawks as escorts." he said, "How do you want them configured?"

"Heavy anti-shipping." Carter said.

"They'll be the first wave along with a single Swift scout ship." Koenig added, "They'll carry out a close range inspection and watch for any signs that this is some sort of trap and provide cover if it is."

"Dozens of lifeless ships all docked at a mysterious space station? That just screams trap to me colonel." Verdeschi said, "Why did they all dock there and what happened to the crews to prevent them from leaving again?"

"I know, that's why I want the first wave to conduct external checks before our Eagles go in with the salvage team." Koenig said.

"We're having the Eagles prepped with enhanced booster engines now. That will make it easier for them to turn around and get back here if the first wave picks up any trouble." Carter added.

"And if the threat is purely internal?" Verdeschi asked.

"In that case the team will have Master Sergeant Washington and a unit of his troops to protect them. If the threat is severe then they'll pull out immediately. Hopefully though they'll be able to secure the *Ultra* quickly and use it as a base of operations while Professor Bergman determines what is useful from the station and the other ships docked there."

"I take it that the Dorcon vessel is a priority?" Verdeschi asked and Koenig nodded.

"Yes, any intelligence we can gather about them will be useful." he said.

"I just wish I could promise that I could fly that ship of theirs back here but that's probably beyond even me." Carter added.

"Yes, we'll have to make do with the *Ultra* itself." Koenig said and Verdeschi frowned.

"You're planning on having the entire ship brought back?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes, I thought that might grab your attention. But if her engines are still working then they can get her back in about eight hours. That does mean that the salvage team will have to operate from their Eagles only after that but I think the capability that that ship would give us is worth it." Koenig said.

"I agree." Verdeschi said, nodding.

"Also since she's not state of the art any more we should have no problems producing spare parts to keep her running." Carter added before Baker called out from her station.

"Colonel I've got a call coming in for you." she said.

"Is it another of that Citizens' Committee?" Koenig asked, "If it is then tell them I'm still too busy doing my job to listen to their idiotic demands and use the word idiotic this time. Last time you were too polite."

"It's a reporter colonel. They want your comment on the Citizens' Committee." Baker said and Koenig wiped a hand across his face.

"Give me strength." he said, sighing. Then he looked at Carter, "Okay major I'm taking over as mission command for this operation."

"You're replacing me?" Carter said.

"Only as mission commander. I still want you to fly one of the Eagles, I doubt anyone else would be able to pilot the *Ultra* back here if she's still operational. But right now sixteen hours without being hassled by journalists or self appointed busybodies sounds pretty good to me." Koenig said.

9.

With little idea of what awaited them aboard the *Ultra* or the alien space station to which it was docked the salvage team prepared for the worst. This meant that the entire team donned spacesuits for the journey just in case it became necessary for them to abandon any of their Eagles. The first wave of two Hawks and a Swift had already launched by the time Koenig and the rest of the second wave personnel were boarding their Eagles and as he and Russell walked towards the boarding tube to theirs they heard Keynes' voice call out from behind them.

"Colonel Koenig!" she shouted and both Koenig and Russell turned towards her.

"Keynes, is there a problem?" Koenig asked as she rushed towards them with her guard behind her.

"I heard about this mission you're going on." Keynes said, "No-one would tell me exactly what you're doing but its obvious that it involves alien spacecraft. Shouldn't I go along as well?"

"Really?" Russell commented, "After you spent five hours bound and gagged aboard an Eagle I'd have thought that the last thing you'd want to do is get aboard another."

"I was hoping that Colonel Koenig would prevent that happening again." Keynes replied.

"Oh so as well as deciding that you're indispensable to this mission you're also deciding which ship you'll be flying aboard?" Russell said.

"I, err, I just thought I could be helpful. That's all." Keynes said.

"Keynes, we're taking Professor Bergman with us. He's more than capable of examining alien technology and Kano knows human technology inside out. I need you here on the moon doing your job in logistics."

Koenig told her, "Now we have to be going. Our window of operations is tight." and then he and Russell turned away from Keynes again and headed into the boarding tube.

"Take care." she called out just before the door slid shut behind them and then her guard put a hand on her shoulder.

"We need to get back to your office." he told her and she grunted.

"Yeah, office." she muttered.

Inside the Eagle Koenig paused in the airlock to look into the passenger module where he saw Professor Bergman and several men and women from both the technical and security sections already strapped into their seats. Some wore their spacesuit helmets with the visors open while others, including the professor cradled theirs in their laps. Then without speaking to them the pair turned the other way and entered the Eagle's cockpit, sitting down, putting their helmets on and strapping themselves in.

"Boarding tube is clear." Russell said as she checked the instruments in front of her that confirmed the Eagle was now isolated from Moonbase Alpha.

"Alpha this is Eagle One requesting permission to launch." Koenig signalled as he took hold of the control column.

"Confirmed Eagle One. You are clear to launch. Good luck colonel." Alexander's voice responded and Koenig pulled back on the Eagle's controls.

From inside the roar of the engines was easily audible as the Eagle rose up off the cross shaped launch pad and then turned towards the location of the *Ultra* and the mysterious alien craft. Three more Eagles joined the one piloted by Koenig and Russell.

"Eagle flight check." Koenig broadcast.

"This is Carter. Eagle Two on course."

"Kano, Eagle Three on course."

"Fraser, Eagle Four on course."

"Alpha this is Eagle One. All Eagles set we are leaving your control zone. See you in sixteen hours all being well. Remind Major Morrow not to go making any appointments for me with civilians while I'm gone. Eagle One out." Koenig transmitted and the four Eagles all began to accelerate away from the moon into space.

The two Hawk attack ships and Swift scout vessel turned to face back towards the moon so that they could use their main space drives to slow down as they approached the alien space station and all of the mysterious craft docked with it. The Swift carried superior sensor equipment to the Hawks or following Eagles and so it was this craft that carried out the detailed study, monitoring for any energy emission that it was capable of detecting as well as sending out active sensor pulses to gauge the effect that these had. The data gathered from all of these scans was transmitted back towards the moon, being picked up by the Eagles on the way where Professor Bergman used a computer tablet to review it himself.

"Fascinating." he said, smiling as he looked at one of the visual images.

"What are you looking at professor?" Washington asked from opposite him. Unlike Bergman the soldier wore the helmet of his armoured spacesuit but had the visor raised to avoid depleting its internal life support.

"What? Oh I was just looking at all these different ships." Bergman replied and he turned the tablet around so that Washington could see them, "You see the different styles? That indicates that they were built by different cultures. I'd say at least eight of them."

"So what are they doing here?" Washington asked and Bergman frowned.

"You know I hadn't considered that." he answered, "I've been so busy in thinking about what we could get from those ships that I never stopped to think about why they were here. If my theory about the Ultra accidentally opening up a wormhole and being brought here at random is correct then the crew probably made their way to the station in the hope of finding a way home. Or at least replenishing their supplies. One the other hand we know that the Dorcons can navigate wormholes so their ship probably came here deliberately. Given what we know about their culture they may have intended to plunder the station for whatever it held. The rest of them though, I can't even guess at what brought them here. Perhaps they too were after salvage just like us."

"Just like you don't know why none of them ever left?" Washington said.

"Yes, I'm afraid so Master Sergeant. I'm sorry not to be able to tell you what we might be up against. If they came here for the same reason as us then we may meet the same fate." Bergman replied.

"No matter professor. I'm sure you'll figure it out soon enough." Washington said, smiling at Bergman.

Troubled by his inability to answer Washington's question Bergman started searching through the data being relayed by the Swift once more only this time he focused on the space station itself rather than the ships docked to it. The close range visual scan that the Swift had been able to carry out revealed that the space station had suffered damage, with its hull badly marked in several places. As far as Bergman could tell the extent of this damage was limited, suggesting that it was the result of multiple collisions with small pieces of space debris rather than a deliberate attack that he would have expected to inflict much more damage than he was looking at. The damage was also not so extensive that it obscured the markings intended to be on the hull and when Bergman zoomed in on this he realised that he knew what he was looking at.

"I need to speak to Colonel Koenig." he said suddenly, releasing his safety harness and leaping to his feet before he rushed along the aisle of the passenger module towards the forward section of the Eagle.

"Just make sure you knock before you barge in professor. You don't know what the colonel and the doctor could be doing to pass the time in there." Washington called out after him.

Bergman just barged into the cockpit anyway, making both Koenig and Russell jump in surprise at his unexpected entrance.

"Colonel! You need to see this!" he exclaimed and he thrust his computer tablet at Koenig. Taking the device Koenig leaned towards Russell so that when she leaned back towards him they could both see the screen.

"What am I looking at?" he asked.

"That's a section of the hull of the space station." Bergman told him, "Of course a lot of it was hidden from us from Alpha but Colonel Verdeschi's Swift has been able to get much better images from more favourable angles."

"Is that writing?" Russell said when she saw a pattern of markings that looked to have been painted on the station's hull. Part of the writing had been destroyed by impacts over the years but there was still enough for a pattern to be recognised.

"Yes it is." Bergman said, "Colonel I've seen that writing before. It belongs to the aliens who attacked Earth. They built this space station."

"Oh great. That's just what I needed to hear. If I'd known that before we left I would have brought armed Eagles and an entire squadron of Hawks." Koenig said before he activated the Eagle's communication system, setting it to broadcast to the entire flight of Eagles as well as to the leading Hawks and Swift as well as back to the moon itself, "This is Colonel Koenig to all units. Professor Bergman has discovered that the space station we're heading for was built by the aliens who attacked Earth, therefore we can assume that it is a hostile environment. I want all units ready to fight as soon as we dock with the Ultra. At least now we have some idea of what we might face so remember what you have been taught. Hawks one and two and Swift one break off immediately and return to Epsilon. I want all forces put on alert just in case there are any more of their facilities in the system. Koenig out."

"I've got Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi calling for you major." Baker announced while the command staff were reacting to Koenig's warning about the origin of the alien space station.

"Put him through to me." Morrow replied and Verdeschi's face appeared on Morrow's console, "Colonel." he said.

"Major Morrow I take it you've received Colonel Koenig's message?" Verdeschi asked.

"Yes colonel I'm currently having our defences brought on line. I've ordered crews to our armed Eagles just in case we need air support. Of course you have seniority so I'll defer to your judgement if you have any other ideas." Morrow replied.

"No, I just wanted to make sure that we're operating on the same page. Alpha can probably look after itself

but I'm going to send men to other bases. Word about this is bound to get out and there could be panic if people think we're about to come under attack." Verdeschi said.

"We've picked up signs of the aliens before colonel." Morrow pointed out.

"Yes, but this time we also have the suggestion that they have been plundering ships that come to this system. People are going to start suggesting that the moon could be their next target." Verdeschi said.

"Yes sir, I'll have our forces put on stand by to assist the sheriff's office if there's any trouble." Morrow said.

"Good. I'm on my way over anyway." Verdeschi said.

"You're coming to Alpha? But surely colonel you're needed at Epsilon to-" Morrow said.

"I can direct the defence of the moon from Alpha just as easily as I can from here but you have something I don't have here." Verdeschi told him.

"Really colonel?"

"Yes, you have Maya and Keynes. Both of them have more experience with the aliens than anyone else on the moon now that Professor Bergman has gone with Colonel Koenig. I want to talk to them both to see what insights they might be able to offer." Verdeschi said.

"Of course colonel. I'll have them waiting for you when you get here." Morrow said.

"Thank you. I'll be on the next travel tube car. I should be with you within the hour." Verdeschi replied and then the screen went blank.

Like the Hawks and Swift before them, the four Eagles turned around to use their main engines to slow down as they approached the alien space station, decelerating until they were travelling slowly enough that the manoeuvring thrusters mounted on their landing gear pods could be used to bring them to a complete halt if needed. At this point the four craft turned once more so that their flight crews could see the station and ships docked with it, in particular the *Ultra* that they hoped to salvage intact.

Aboard Eagle Two, Carter grinned as he studied the long lost Earth vessel.

"Thing of beauty." he said, glancing at his co-pilot before he activated the communication system, "Eagle Four this is Eagle Two. What do you think of that Bill?"

"She looks in perfect condition major." Fraser responded, "All the fusion drives look intact and I don't see any hull breaches."

"Okay cut the chatter." Koenig ordered, "We'll dock along the main arm, sensors indicate that the *Ultra* is operating in a low power mode. Some of the life support systems might still be functioning but we'll go in in suits just in case and be prepared for zero-g. I want all infantry units ready to go in first. If the aliens have left any nasty surprises for us then they're best equipped to deal with them. Koenig out."

Koenig and the other Eagle pilots then began to turn their ships so that they were aligned along the tail section of the *Ultra*, positioned beneath it so that they could rise up to mate their upper docking tubes with the ports meant to allow the ship to transport a small number of Vultures and Swifts. With only two of these craft remaining in place there were ample free locations for the flight of Eagles to take the place of the absent vessels instead and one by one they connected with the *Ultra*.

Aboard Eagle One Washington and his squad of soldiers were already in the air lock with their visors down and their magnetic accelerator rifles ready when they heard the sound of the docking seal being made.

"Okay we're up." Washington said, "Are we secure?"

"All seals tight. No risk to the ship.." one of his men told him and Washington slung his rifle so that he could reach up and lower the ladder his men would use to climb aboard the *Ultra*.

Washington was the first to climb up the ladder to the *Ultra*, opening the Eagle's upper hatch to reveal the patrol ship's own hatch. At this point he reached for the pistol he had in a shoulder holster. Like the rest of his men Washington carried a stun gun as a sidearm but without knowing what he might face on the other side of the hatch he had no way of knowing whether the laser energy of the pulsed energy projectile would be effective. On the other hand a solid magnetically accelerated projectile would inflict damage on whatever it hit and so he also carried a second back up weapon that he could use one handed.

"I'm in position." he said, the radio built into his space suit transmitting his words to the Eagle's cockpit.

"Sending the access command now." Russell said, using the physical link between between Eagle One and the *Ultra* to access the controls to the *Ultra's* hatch, triggering it to slide open.

From his position on the ladder Washington could see that the interior of the *Ultra's* tail section was dark and only the light that came from the flash light mounted to his helmet provided any illumination as he slowly climbed through the hatch. Inside his spacesuit Washington could not tell what the temperature inside the ship was like but it had gravity close to Earth standard and this enabled him to stand up and look around him at his surroundings. He was standing in a corridor wide enough for a moon buggy to be driven down without risking hitting the sides running along the tail. The flash light mounted to Washington's helmet was not enough to fully illuminate this but he could see that the walls of the corridor were lined with lockers for spacesuits and other equipment. A number of these had been opened and equipment taken while other items were scattered across the floor. At regular intervals along this floor Washington could see hatches

identical to the one he had just climbed up through and it was obvious that these led to more of the *Ultra*'s exterior docking ports.

"We're clear, come on up." he broadcast, stepping away from the hatch to make room for his men as he holstered his pistol.

"What are the environmental conditions like in there sergeant?" Russell asked from Eagle One's cockpit.

"Gravity appears normal." he responded as he reached for the sensor device he carried clipped to his belt and checked its display, "We've got air as well. Oxygen level okay, low CO two. Should be breathable. The temperature's a little on the low side but I'd call it chilly rather than freezing."

"I want everyone to keep their suits on for now." Koenig ordered, "Other than that if Master Sergeant Washington is satisfied then I am too. Everyone disembarked, I want the *Ultra* secured."

S.

Baker stood at the travel tube platform with a stun gun holstered on her leg and a pair of more heavily armed and armoured soldiers behind her when the doors to the newly arrived car opened and the passengers began to disembark. Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi was easy to spot in his GDF uniform among the civilian crowd and Baker walked along the platform to him, coming to attention and saluting.

"Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi, Major Morrow sends his compliments and has asked me to escort you to main mission." she said.

"At ease spacewoman." Verdeschi responded, returning her salute. Then he looked at the two armed soldiers, "Not thinking of putting me under arrest I hope." he added.

"No sir. Give the spate of attacks we've had on uniformed military personnel the major was concerned that someone might consider you a prime target and wanted to make sure you got to the command section safely and I volunteered." Baker told him.

"Thank you for being so considerate." Verdeschi said.

"It's no problem sir. It gets me out of main mission while she's there." Baker commented.

"She?" Verdeschi asked.

"The traitor. Alyson Keynes." Baker responded.

"Of course. However, perhaps we shouldn't waste any more time loitering out in public. Lead the way spacewoman." Verdeschi said and Baker nodded before she began to escort him away from the tube station, the two soldiers following close behind and alert for any signs of an ambush, "So how many attacks have there been?" Verdeschi asked as they walked.

"A few dozen. Mostly minor but one technician needed surgery." Baker told him. Then she noticed a group of people ahead of them in the corridor, all of them civilians, "Uh-oh." she said.

"Trouble spacewoman?" Verdeschi asked.

"No sir. Well, maybe. The man in the suit is called Foxworth. He's part of some self appointed group that wants to take over the running of the moon. They call themselves the Citizens' Committee and they keep demanding to see Colonel Koenig again." Baker answered.

"Ah, so he's why Koenig was so keen to be a few million kilometres away. What about the rest?"

"I don't know sir." Baker said but at that point one of the others in the group with Foxworth suddenly produced a microphone while another lifted a camera onto his shoulder.

"Excuse me Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi." Foxworth called out.

"All requests for interviews should go through the GDF public relations office." Baker responded and one of the soldiers following her and Verdeschi moved forwards to stand between them and the reporters with Foxworth.

"Tell Colonel Koenig that he can't keep avoiding me. He has to answer to the people sooner or later. They demand answers." Foxworth called out as the military personnel continued to walk past him towards a door that led into the restricted command section of Moonbase Alpha. Baker took out her comlock as they approached the door and used the device to open it so that they did not need to wait in the public hallway with Foxworth and the reporters. Immediately on the other side of the door was a security checkpoint and the guards there double checked the identities of the four new arrivals.

"Do you know you've got a group of civilians loitering out there sergeant?" Baker commented to the guard commander and the man nodded in reply.

"I've been watching them on the monitor." he said, pointing to a display, "They don't appear armed and you're the first people they've tried to stop. Do you want me to move them along colonel?"

"No, I don't think they're a security threat. Keep an eye on them all the same. If that group starts to grow then you'll need to make sure the hallway is kept clear."

"Yes sir." the sergeant said before Baker continued to escort Verdeschi the short distance to main mission.

In Koenig's absence Morrow was occupying his desk while both Keynes and Maya sat opposite him.

"No need to show me up spacewoman." Verdeschi said softly when he saw this and Baker smiled.

"Thank you colonel." she said before returning to her station while Verdeschi headed up the steps to Koenig's office, "Making yourself comfortable major?" he asked with a grin.

"I just thought it would be good for our guests to wait here instead of standing in main mission." Morrow replied as he vacated Koenig's seat so that Verdeschi could sit down in it instead.

"Thank you major." Verdeschi said and then he looked across the desk at Keynes and Maya, "Now then ladies have you both had chance to study the images sent back by our Swift of the alien space station?"

"Yes lieutenant colonel. The writing on the hull is that of the Outsiders." Maya said, using the term applied by the Dorcons to the alien species that attacked both them and humanity and was responsible for the creation of the Psychons.

"Can you tell what it says?" Verdeschi said.

"Yes lieutenant colonel." Maya replied, "It marks the space station out as somewhere here the Outsiders conducted scientific research."

"What sort of research?" Morrow asked.

"The writing does not tell me Major Morrow. I am sorry I cannot help." Maya said.

"There's no need to apologise Maya." Verdeschi said and he turned his chair to look at Keynes, "And what about you Miss Keynes? You spent several years examining alien technology, does any of this look familiar to you?"

"No sir." Keynes replied, shaking her head, "The aliens didn't set up fixed facilities in space when they launched their attacks against us. We did encounter some of the research facilities that they constructed on Earth, plus the research section aboard their mothership but that's it. Perhaps if I could go there then-"

"No, I'm not wasting the four hours or so it would take for an Eagle to get you to the station. Besides which Colonel Koenig has professor Bergman with him. I want to know what threat that station might represent to the moon itself. For some reason all those spaceships docked with the station never left. Could whatever happened to their crews affect us as well?"

Maya reached out for the glass of water on the desk in front of her before she answered and took a sip.

"Lieutenant Colonel-" she began before she suddenly let out a gasp and the glass fell from her grip, smashing on the office floor as Maya went limp in her chair.

"Maya." Verdeschi exclaimed and both he and Morrow rushed to help.

"What's wrong?" Baker called out from main mission.

"Maya just collapsed." Morrow told her while he and Verdeschi laid her out on the floor.

"She's still breathing." Verdeschi said and then he looked at the command staff, "What's the status of Colonel Koenig and the salvage team?" he asked.

"Colonel perhaps we should get help for Maya." Benes suggested.

"Just tell me where Koenig is." Verdeschi ordered and Alexander checked her console.

"Our sensors still put them short of the station but given the time lag between here and there I'd say that they've probably gone aboard the *Ultra* by now." she said.

"That's either a staggering co-incidence or something to be worried about." Morrow said and Verdeschi looked at him.

"You mean that as soon as our people go aboard the *Ultra* something happens to make Maya pass out?" Verdeschi said and Morrow nodded.

"Let's get her to the medical section. Perhaps Doctor Matthias can find out what's wrong with her.

"Okay Baker, you're Maya's friend so you go with her. Benes you as well." Morrow said, "Everyone else back to work. I want to know the moment we see any change in that station or any of the alien ships around it."

There was more than enough room inside the corridor aboard the *Ultra* for the entire salvage team from all four Eagles to enter without it being overcrowded. One group led by Kano made their way towards the drive section at the rear of the ship while Koenig led another team forwards until they found their way blocked by a heavy door. Beside the door there was a control panel but this was not lit up and when Koenig tried pressing it nothing happened.

"Think we can force this open?" Carter asked.

"Perhaps." Koenig replied, "But it might be sealed for a reason and I don't want to lose this ship just because we damaged it."

"We could always try bypassing it with an EVA." Fraser suggested, "Exit via one of the Eagles and go back in through an air lock ahead of this."

"I'd rather not risk an EVA before we know that we can't get it open from the inside." Koenig said before he set his radio to transmit further than just his own group, "Captain Kano do you read me?" he signalled.

"Yes colonel." Kano responded.

"Where are you?" Koenig asked him.

"Engineering section colonel. Everything looks intact here. In fact I think that the *Ultra's* systems were deliberately put into a low power mode to conserve fuel. I should be able to bring them back on line in under an hour." Kano told him.

"Kano we've encountered a snag. There's a sealed door leading to the forward sections and the control panel doesn't respond. Is that something that you think you can get working again? We're going to have to get to the front of the ship if Carter and Fraser are going to be able to fly it back to the moon." Koenig said.

"Yes, we encountered one of those as well." Kano said.

"How did you get through it?" Koenig said.

"I just used my comlock. The panel was dead but the control system is still active." Kano said and Koenig reached for his comlock. Looking at the screen he saw that the device had detected the control system to the door in front of him.

"Stand to." Washington ordered the ground troops escorting Koenig and his team and they all took positions around the door, aiming their rifles at it before Koenig pressed the button on his comlock's touchscreen to open it.

The *Ultra's* computer network recognised the GDF comlock and responded by opening the door without any delay.

"Go." Washington said and his men moved forwards through the door into the compartment beyond. This was much larger than the corridor and the large number of shelves and cupboards made it clear that this was a storage area.

"John this section is warmer." Russell said as she and Koenig stepped into the room together and she looked at her environmental sensor. Holding it up she showed Koenig that the ambient temperature of the storage room was within the range tolerable by human beings.

"Hey take a look at this." Carter called out suddenly when he looked along a row of shelves and saw that some of the boxes on one of them had come off and were now lying on the floor, open. Moving closer he saw that the boxes contained emergency ration packages and he crouched down to take a closer look.

"No! They're mine!" a voice yelled out and all of a sudden a figure leapt out of the darkness to attack Carter, pushing him away from the boxes. In his hand the man held a crow bar and he raised this up above his head before there was a flash of light as Koenig shot him with his stun gun. The man's eyes widened suddenly and the crow bar fell from his grasp to land beside him on the floor as he collapsed in a heap, gasping for breath.

"Helena, quickly." Koenig and the pair of them rushed to take a closer look at the man, joined by Washington and some of his men. As soon as they reached him Washington kicked the crow bar out of his reach while two of his men slung their rifles and grabbed hold of the man.

"I think he'll be alright. The stun blast didn't inflict any permanent damage." Russell said, examining the man carefully and shining a light into his eyes.

"Oh he'll be alright? That's just fine then." Carter said, frowning while he picked himself up off the floor, "Who the hell is he anyway?"

"Lieutenant Cellini." Russell said, looking at the clothes the man wore. Although dirty and tattered in places his clothing was still recognisable as a GDF uniform that had the name 'Cellini' marked on his chest and lieutenant's rank markings on each shoulder, "I think he's one of the *Ultra's* crew."

"According to the specs I looked at there should be crew quarters just ahead of us. Let's get him in there and you can take a better look at him." Koenig told Russell and she nodded. Meanwhile Carter frowned and reached up his hand to Fraser.

"Looks like I'm on my own then. Come on Bill give me a hand." he said and Fraser reached down to pull him back to his feet.

The door leading to the *Ultra's* crew quarters was already open and Cellini was carried through into what was obviously a combined lounge and dining area before being set down on a table.

"I need more light if I'm going to examine him properly." Russell said and Koenig nodded.

"Kano, how are you with the power?" he transmitted.

"Just about to try the main switch now colonel." Kano responded and then all of a sudden all of the lights in the crew quarters came back on, "How's that looking sir?" Kano asked.

"Excellent captain. Let me know as soon as you know what state the ship is in." Koenig told him before turning his attention back to Cellini.

In proper light it was much easier to make out the facial features of the apparently only surviving crewman of the *Ultra* and as expected he appeared to have aged significantly during his years alone on the ship. His hair was now white and starting to thin and his skin was wrinkled.

"So how is he doc?" Koenig asked.

"He'll be fine John." Russell replied, "All things considered I'd say he was in excellent health for a man of his age who has been trapped alone here for forty years. Of course I'll need to get him back to Alpha to carry out a full medical examination but my initial diagnosis is that he's going live."

"Will he tolerate being woken up? I need to know what happened here. If he survived this long then perhaps someone else did as well." Koenig said.

"Do you want my men to continue sweeping the ship colonel?" Washington asked and Koenig nodded.

"Yes. But use stun guns only. I don't want any of the crew who did survive being accidentally killed right on the moment of being rescued." he replied.

"Okay men, you heard the colonel. Sling those rifles and draw your stun guns. There could be friendlies in here." Washington told his troops and after swapping their weapons they began to spread out, taking different exits from the room to search as much of the ship as they could. Meanwhile Koenig turned back to Cellini again just as Russell was injecting him with a stimulant. As soon as she had administered the injection the old man let out a scream and sat up suddenly.

"Easy lieutenant." Russell told him, taking hold of his shoulders and lowering him back down to the table. As she did so Koenig stood over him and removed his helmet, reasoning that if Cellini had survived several

decades aboard the *Ultra* then the air was safe enough for him to be exposed to for at least a short period of time.

"You're human. All of you human?" Cellini said.

"Helmets off everyone." Koenig ordered and all around him the rest of his team began to remove the helmets from their spacesuits so that their faces could be seen fully. Then he looked back at Cellini, "Yes Lieutenant Cellini, we're human. From Earth." he said, "You are Lieutenant Cellini, aren't you? My name is Colonel John Koenig, commanding officer of Moonbase Alpha."

Cellini nodded.

"Yes, I'm Lieutenant Cellini. Tony Cellini. But how are you here? How did a team from the moon get here?" he asked.

"That's a long story lieutenant and we don't have time for it right now. Everything will be explained to you later once we get the *Ultra* back to the moon. Right now though I need to know what happened here. How did the *Ultra* get this deep into space and what happened to the rest of the crew?" Koenig replied.

"Something went wrong with the Orion drive." Cellini said, "The captain ordered it to be test fired while we were patrolling around the moons of Jupiter."

"Did you use it at a Lagrange point?" Bergman asked.

"Yes, yes a Lagrange point. that's it." Cellini replied, nodding, "The captain decided to use it as a reference point and that's where we ejected the charge. It seemed to detonate normally but instead of the ship being pushed forwards we encountered some force dragging us back. I don't know what it was but all our instruments failed at the same time and then there was a bright flash of light and the ship shook violently. The shaking stopped after a few seconds and we suddenly found that we weren't where we'd started off. Our navigation system was still off line so we tried getting a visual fix on our position from the stars but we couldn't identify any of them. Not one constellation or single star matched anything we knew. That's when the captain realised that we must have been transported to a different solar system somehow. Our ship was intact and all the crew survived so we set to work restoring the systems to full functionality. That's when we detected the space station. We saw it and several ships docked here and attempted to make contact via radio. When that failed the captain ordered us to try docking instead. The docking ports matched the type used by the aliens that attacked Earth so we knew how to establish a seal and our breaching protocols worked to gain access to the station. The captain sent a team aboard to see if there was anything we could use to get us home or at least to keep us alive. They were heavily armed but they still never came back, any of them. All we got was a brief radio signal that they were under attack that was cut off suddenly."

"Attack? Attacked by whom Cellini?" Koenig said.

"They didn't say, they didn't have the time before they were cut off. We only found out later at the end. The captain took another team, half the remaining crew with the best weapons we had to try and find our men but they were killed as well. That's when the creatures came for the rest of us." Cellini replied.

"Creatures?" Carter commented, "Aliens? Alien soldiers?"

"Aliens yes but not soldiers. We never saw them fully, only in part. They looked like massive snakes, a metre wide and so long we never saw their tails. They battered the hatch open and came in through it. We tried to fight them but bullets and stunners had no effect. You could blow the head off one and it just flailed around. They grabbed crewmen in their mouths and swallowed them whole, sometimes you could see where our people were fighting to avoid being pulled deeper down their throats even inside the creatures but it did no good. We fell back from the hatch and tried to hide but the snakes came after us still. They found us all one by one and took us until I was the only one left. I've been alone ever since then. I don't think they know that I'm still here." Cellini continued but then it suddenly seemed to dawn on him that the *Ultra's* lights were on again, "No, the lights! You have to turn off the lights. If they see they'll come for us again and they'll kill us all."

6.

"Maya are you okay?" Matthias asked, peering into Maya's pale eyes when they flickered open.

"Yes thank you doctor, I am fine." she replied.

"Maya thank God." Baker said, taking Maya's hand, "You had us worried when you suddenly collapsed in main mission like that."

"Maya can you tell us what happened?" Benes added, "We think that you blacked out at about the same time Colonel Koenig and his salvage team will have reached the alien space station. Did what happened to you have something to do with that?"

"I do not know Captain Benes." Maya answered, "I just suddenly felt something, a feeling stronger than anything I have ever felt before. Normally I must be close to a person to sense their feelings but I know that this came from a long way off, how far I do not know."

"What did you sense Maya?" Benes said and Maya hesitated.

"Maya, are you sure you're okay?" Baker said and Maya nodded.

"Yes I am fine Francis, I was just trying to find the right word to describe what I felt." she explained.

"So what was it?" Benes said.

"Hunger. It was hunger Captain Benes." Maya replied.

"I think Maya's had quite enough excitement for now." Matthias said and then he looked at her, "Maya I'm going to discharge you now but I want you to take things easy for the next twelve hours. If you start to feel unwell again then don't bother trying to get here just stay where you are and use your comlock to summon us. I'll send a medical team to get you. Spacewoman Baker can you make sure that Maya gets back to your quarters safely?"

"Of course, it's no problem." Baker replied, nodding.

"I'll let Colonel Verdeschi know what happened. He'll want to warn Colonel Koenig." Benes added and as Maya was being helped up off her bed by Baker, Benes stepped back and took out her comlock, "This is Benes." she said as she called Verdeschi's comlock directly.

"Go ahead captain. How's Maya?" Verdeschi responded.

"Doctor Matthias has given her the all clear but he wants her to take things easy for a while so Baker's taking her back to their quarters. Colonel it seems that Maya's collapse was related to the space station. She says that she was overcome when she sensed something. She called it hunger." Benes said.

"I don't like the sound of that at all." Verdeschi said.

"No, neither do I sir." Benes agreed.

"Still it's interesting that she was able to sense it from this far away and in real time it seems. Thank you captain. Get back here and return to your post. I'm going to warn Colonel Koenig. It will take twenty minutes for a signal to get to him but I think he needs to know that he's not alone out there." Verdeschi said.

"Yes colonel. I'm on my way back to main mission now. Benes out." Benes replied before she shut off her comlock.

Given that there would be a delay of twenty minutes for any signal sent from the moon to reach the salvage team aboard the *Ultra* and there was no way of knowing exactly who would be available to receive it Verdeschi decided to send the warning by text rather than voice. Addressing the message so that when it reached the Eagles they would automatically forward it to Koenig, Russell, Carter and Kano he typed out a brief explanation of what had happened.

Maya briefly overcome at about the time you believed to have docked with alien space station by unknown force. Upon recovery she described it as 'hunger'. Looks like you're not alone. Advise caution.

Washington and a fire team of his men crouched just inside the *Ultra*, looking out through its air lock into the gloomy air lock of the alien space station that the ship was docked with. Neither of the *Ultra*'s air lock doors, the inner one or the heavier outer one had been opened normally, instead both had obviously been struck repeatedly by a force strong enough to rip them out of position and their remains now lay on the floor where they had landed. The walls of the interior of the air lock were also marked in a manner that Washington had seen many times before in his career, they were the marks left by projectiles as they struck a hard surface and were deflected off it. The angles these were at indicated that the gunfire had come from inside the *Ultra*, suggesting that the crew had been firing small arms at whatever it was that had forced its way aboard the ship. Of these invaders, or the crew attempting to keep them out though, there was no sign.

Taking a chemical light stick from his webbing Washington activated it and then tossed it forwards so that he could see the path it took through the air. As he had intended it was still travelling upwards when it crossed the threshold between the *Ultra* and the alien station and he smiled as it then began to dip, travelling in an arc before landing on the floor and proving that the station also still had artificial gravity.

"Colonel this is Washington. I'm at the air lock connecting to the station. There is still gravity on the other side and your report was correct, something smashed open the air lock. Both doors. We'll need to seal the breach before we leave or we'll run out of air pretty quick heading back to the moon." he transmitted to Koenig.

"Master Sergeant Washington, can you see anything outside the ship?" Koenig responded.

"A small stretch of corridor. No sign of any instrumentation or equipment though." Washington told him.

"I want to know what the conditions are aboard the station itself sergeant. Take a squad into the station to survey the layout. A full squad, the survivor from the crew has indicated that the creatures who attacked the ship prey on people who head into the station."

"Yes colonel. What are your orders if we encounter any of these creatures?" Washington asked.

"Do whatever it takes to get yourself and your men back here alive sergeant. Collateral damage to the station is acceptable." Koenig said.

"Yes colonel, I'll take out a patrol." Washington responded.

While Russell continued to examine Cellini, doing her best to assess the impact spending four decades alone aboard the *Ultra* had had on him, Koenig took Carter and Fraser and the three men headed towards the front of the ship where its cockpit was located. Along the way they noticed more doors that had been smashed open by some great force, matching the pattern Cellini had described. This continued until they reached the door that led to the command section, just short of the cockpit itself. This door was heavily armoured both as a precaution against the ship being boarded and also because this was the point at which the command module could be separated from the rest of the ship to function as an emergency lifeboat. This door was intact but it still showed signs of damage and the three men paused to take a look at this.

"Looks like someone took an axe to it." Carter said, running his fingers over the deep cuts in the surface of the door.

"Like an axe from an emergency equipment store?" Koenig suggested and he reached out to open the door of a locker labelled 'EMERGENCY' that was set into the wall nearby. Most doors aboard GDF craft were made of toughened plastic rather than armoured metal so that while they would still be proof against decompression and resistant to blast damage they could be broken down with a suitable tool in an emergency. To achieve this, two handed axes were kept with other stores or emergency equipment at strategic points around the ship. Sure enough when Koenig opened the door to the locker the bracket that had once held such an axe was empty.

"I wonder why they couldn't get the door open?" Fraser said and Koenig took out his comlock, pointing it towards the door. Exactly as had happened earlier the signal from the comlock was accepted by the *Ultra's* network and both layers of the door slid open to reveal the mess that lay inside the command module. Given its secondary role as a lifeboat, the command module carried enough rations to last the command crew for several weeks which combined with a small water tank and recycling system was intended to keep them alive long enough for either a rescue team to arrive or for the lifeboat to limp back to port. Now the packaging from these rations lay piled at either side of the command module, below where they had been taken from their storage bins.

"Looks like Cellini is something of a litterer." Fraser commented as he stepped over a pile of foil wrappers.

"There's nowhere to dispose of the empty wrappers in here." Koenig pointed out.

"No but he could still have tidied up after himself colonel." Carter added.

"Could he?" Koenig replied and he pointed at the double layered doors leading back to the main section of the ship, "Someone desperately wanted to get through those doors, presumably to escape the creatures Lieutenant Cellini said killed the rest of the crew. Yet they just opened easily enough for us so why not for them? I think that the reason whoever it was that took an axe to those doors couldn't get in here is because Cellini was already in here and he locked them. He invoked the counter intruder protocols to seal himself inside and left the rest of the crew to die. That's how he managed to survive. From the looks of things he stayed in here as long as he had rations and only then did he unseal the doors. By that time of course he was the only one left. The creatures had already gone."

"So he just abandoned all his mates." Carter said with a look of disgust on his face.

"That's what it looks like to me. Fear can make men do strange things. Given that and that I doubt we'll ever prove exactly what happened here then for now I won't take this any further but I suggest you keep an eye on him. He's probably harmless but if he starts acting strangely then we may need to get Doctor Russell to sedate him until we can get back to Alpha. Now let's take a look at the cockpit."

Moving to the very front of the ship the three men found the *Ultra's* cockpit. This was laid out in a similar fashion to that of an Eagle, with two flight control stations set at a lower level than the walkway running between them but there were also three further control stations behind them for the ship's commander and communications and weapons officers. The rest of the command staff who monitored the operation of the ships systems would not be seated in here, instead they would occupy two rows of seats either side of the compartment immediately behind the cockpit.

"Everything looks intact colonel." Fraser said as he and Carter each sat down in one of the flight control positions and Koenig took the commander's seat.

"Assuming all the systems behind these work we should have no problems flying this ship. Under fusion power at least. I've never piloted anything with an Orion drive." Carter added.

"I don't think many people have major. They only made three of these ships after all." Koenig pointed out, "I'll just see what Kano has to say about getting this ship under way." and he took out his comlock, "Kano this is Koenig." he transmitted.

"Kano here colonel." Kano's voice responded.

"Captain are you in a position to tell me how soon we can depart?" Koenig asked.

"Unsurprisingly the fusion plant was put on low power, its just been ticking over for about forty years without anyone taking a look at it. That means I need to make sure that the system is still capable of handling full power before we fire up the engines. I should be done in about four hours I think. If you wanted to try the Orion drive then that could be working sooner. We just need thrusters to get us away from the station and then you can fire the drive."

"No thank you captain. Major Carter isn't confident about using the Orion drive. Besides, wouldn't that mean we'd have to hurl a nuclear bomb towards the moon to slow us down again?" Koenig said.

"If I can't get the fusion drive working again then yes." Kano replied.

"Then I think we'll pass on the Orion drive. Get the fusion reactor on line as quickly as you can captain and keep me up to date with your progress." Koenig ordered.

"Yes colonel." Kano replied and just as Koenig was putting his comlock away again he heard footsteps from behind him and he turned to see Professor Bergman approaching.

"Yes professor, what is it?" he asked.

"I was wondering when I'll be getting to go and take a look at some of those other alien spacecraft colonel. That is why you had me come along after all." Bergman said and Koenig nodded.

"I've got Washington checking out the space station right now. If there are hostile alien lifeforms aboard then I need weigh the risk to your safety against anything we might learn. I'll make a decision when he checks in. If it does look safe enough for you to leave the Ultra then I'll have sergeant Washington escort you to the Dorcon ship. I think that should be our priority."

Washington's patrol moved cautiously, darting from corner to corner and checking every turning for anyone or anything that might be hiding somewhere among the myriad of corridors and chambers of the space station. Worryingly all of the doorways that the patrol encountered stood open, most of the doors themselves having obviously been smashed down just as the doors aboard the Ultra had been. This also applied to the doors of an elevator shaft that the patrol came to, only rather than having been broken it these doors lay on the floor outside the shaft and it was clear that whatever had smashed them open had been inside the shaft trying to get out rather than outside trying to get in.

"How far down do you think this goes sergeant?" one of the soldiers asked as he peered through the open doorway and looked down.

"Be careful. If you fall I'm not going down after you." Washington warned the soldier. The soldier stepped back when Washington said this and at the same time he looked upwards through the doorway as well.

"I wonder how far up it goes as well." he commented.

"Never mind that Crowther, just get away from that shaft." Washington ordered and the patrol began to move away from the elevator doors. However, Crowther had taken just a few steps when all of a sudden he let out a scream and the other soldiers spun around to see their comrade under attack.

Illuminated by the beams from the soldiers' flash lights, the creature emerging from the elevator shaft looked like a long serpent with a pyramidal head. This had split open to reveal rows of sharp teeth that it had dug into Crowther and now it was shaking him violently, lifting him up off the floor as it attempted to dig its fangs through his body armour. In places where there were gaps between the rigid plates the creature's teeth were able to easily pierce his spacesuit and blood pumped out as he screamed.

The rest of the patrol pointed their rifles at the creature but held their fire for fear of hitting Crowther instead. "Spread out!" Washington snapped, "If you get a clear shot then take it."

The troops did as ordered, splitting into two groups and heading both left and right as they tried to get a clear angle of fire at the creature attacking Crowther. Washington was the first to fire, shooting a burst of magnetically accelerated projectiles into the side of the creature and where these struck red plumes of what he took to be blood erupted. Washington was joined by the rest of his men, all firing rapid bursts as the opportunity presented itself and there were more plumes of blood. However, although the projectiles were able to pierce the creature's hide they showed no indication hitting any vital organs and its behaviour did not alter up until the point where Crowther suddenly fell silent and went limp. At this point the creature stopped its violent movements and began to retreat back into the elevator shaft while Washington and his surviving men continued to fire at it ineffectively.

Washington charged up to the open shaft and looked inside and watched as the creature retreated upwards, moving backwards so that its head remained facing him at all times.

"Colonel Koenig this is Washington." he said into his radio.

"Go ahead Washington." Koenig responded.

"Sir my patrol has come under attack by a single alien creature and I've lost one man, Crowther. The creature withdrew up an elevator shaft and it took Crowther's body with it.

Then before Koenig could respond one of Washington's men tapped him on the shoulder.

"Look sergeant!" he exclaimed pointing along a corridor at where another of the serpent-like creatures was heading towards them out of the darkness. As with the first creature the far end of this one was hidden from view, only its head emerging from the shadows and its head unfolded, sections spreading apart to reveal row after row of sharp teeth in a circular pattern.

"Open fire!" Washington snapped and his men all fired together, aiming their weapons right down the creature's throat. This made the creature hesitate, pausing and moving from side to side. Taking advantage of this delay in its advance Washington ceased fire and pulled a stun grenade from his webbing, pulled out the pin and he hurled it towards the gaping maw. As he had hoped the compact explosive went right into the creature's mouth and was part way down its throat when it exploded. Although it produced only a minimal amount of shrapnel, relying on the concussive force of its detonation to disorientate those caught within its area of effect, the explosive when contained inside the creature was sufficient to shred the flesh surrounding it and there was a massive spray of blood as the creature's body was completely severed and its head dropped to the floor.

However, despite being decapitated the creature did not die and its neck still swayed back and forth as blood flowed out onto the floor of the corridor. Then all of a sudden the stump of the neck shot backwards into the darkness as what remained of the creature retreated, leaving the soldiers alone in the corridor.

"Washington, what's going on?" Koenig's voice demanded over the radio.

"We were attacked by another of the creatures sir." Washington responded, "I managed to blast its head clean off but it still didn't die."

"Wait, did you just say that you blew off its head and it still didn't stop?" Koenig asked.

"Not quite sir. It retreated. I'm bringing my men back before any more of those things can show up."

Washington said and then he looked down at the severed head of the creature on the floor of the corridor,

"Could you let Doctor Russell know that we're bringing her a present? Perhaps if she takes a look at this head she can tell us what we have to do to kill these things." Washington said and then he turned to his men and added, "Come on, let's drag this thing back to the doc."

7.

Koenig was just returning to the crew quarters when his comlock alerted him to an incoming message being relayed from Eagle One and he sighed when he saw the warning from Verdeschi.

"Helena have you seen this message from Tony?" he asked as he entered the lounge area where Russell sat.

"The one that just arrived? Yes. He may be twenty light minutes away but I think it still counts as stating the obvious." she replied.

"Quite." Koenig said, "Look, Washington and his men are on their way back. They ran into some of the creatures he described." and then he looked at a bunk where Cellini lay, now sleeping.

"Was anyone hurt?" Russell asked and Koenig nodded.

"Crowther's dead. The first creature to attack them took him before it retreated with his body. Then another one hit them and Washington blew its head clean off." he said, "The thing is that it still didn't die. It did pull back though and Washington's men are bringing back the head. I want you to take a look at it."

"No!" Cellini cried out, suddenly leaping up from his bunk and revealing that he had been awake and listening, "You can't do it. You can't bring one back here. What one knows they all know. They're all the same." and he suddenly pushed past Koenig and Russell to rush through a doorway and out of sight.

"We better go after him John. He's clearly been disturbed by his time here." Russell said.

"Yes, I know. I think he went to some extreme measures to survive." Koenig agreed and the pair of them hurried after Cellini.

Cellini led Koenig and Russell back in the direction of the *Ultra's* tail section to a cluster of compartments located adjacent to the storage compartment where they had first encountered him. Seeing him duck into one of these they followed and were just in time to see him crawling through a tiny hole in the wall where he had removed an access panel.

"Where the hell is he going?" Koenig said.

"I don't know but we have to get him out of there if I'm going to try and bring him back to full health." Russell replied and they both approached the hole slowly before they crouched down and peered through the hole. Even with the *Ultra's* lights now reactivated it was difficult to see inside the hole and when Koenig shone his flash light inside they saw Cellini cowering in the corner on one of a set of cushions that looked to have been arranged to form a bed while around it were scattered all manner of objects he had hoarded for some reason.

"I guess this is where he's been living." Koenig said.

"Cellini is this somewhere that you feel safe?" Russell asked and Cellini nodded quickly.

"Too small." he said, "Too small for them to get in here."

"Very clever." Koenig commented as he looked at the hole leading to Cellini's hiding place, "Those things can't get inside so he's safe as long as he stays in there."

"John maybe we should leave him there for the time being. If he feels safe then he'll be easier to deal with. We can get him out when we've dealt with the creatures." Russell suggested.

"Okay but I'm putting a guard on him just in case." Koenig replied, "I'll wait here for them to arrive. You go and take a look at that head Washington's bringing back."

"I'll get right on it." Russell said and she turned around and headed back to the lounge.

She arrived in the lounge just as Washington and his patrol were lifted the severed head of the alien creature onto one of the tables while Bergman watched with interest.

"Come to lend a hand professor?" Russell asked.

"Oh no." Bergman answered, shaking his head, "Biology, even Earth biology isn't really my area of expertise. However, there is little else for me to be doing and I will need Master Sergeant Washington's men to escort me to the Dorcon warship when I am finally allowed to go so I may as well wait near him."

"This is it doctor." Washington said, stepping back from the head.

"I see Cellini's comment about the size was accurate." Russell said she studied the alien head, noting its size and Washington nodded.

"The other one managed to wrap its mouth around Crowther's waist and lifted him up." he said.

"Were you able to get an idea of the overall size of the creatures?" Russell said.

"Sorry doctor. This one came out of the dark and the other out of an elevator shaft. We never saw the other end but the other one must have been at least twenty metres long to have stretched down from the floor above us. They were creepy as well."

"How so sergeant?" Russell said.

"Well its just that they never made a sound. You shoot something and it screams unless you kill it so quickly that it doesn't have time. But we blew chunks off these and they were silent the whole time."

"This looks like blast damage." Russell said, pointing at the torn flesh of the head, "How did you sever the head?"

"With a grenade." Washington told her.

"The sarge threw it right down that thing' throat." one of his men added, grinning.

"I still didn't kill it though." Washington pointed out, "How the hell do we kill something that can survive getting its head blown off doctor?"

"Perhaps the brain is located further back." Bergman suggested.

"Assuming it has a brain as we know it." Russell commented.

"I've left a couple of men guarding Cellini." Koenig announced as he then entered the room, halting when he saw the alien creature's head on the table, "Wow that thing is ugly." he added, "So what happened to the rest of it?"

"We didn't hang around when it retreated." Washington replied.

"Would finding the rest of this creature be of help to you doctor?" Koenig asked and Russell nodded.

"Of course. There doesn't appear to be very much in this sample aside from muscle and teeth." she said.

"Master sergeant Washington I want to lead a party aboard the alien space station to try and find the rest of this creature. Can you lead me back to where you encountered it?" Koenig said.

"Yes colonel. I mapped out our route as we went. I can get you back there." Washington said.

"And from the looks of this I'd say that the rest of the creature left one hell of a blood trail to follow." Koenig said and Washington smiled.

"That it did colonel." he said.

"The sergeant did indicate that this creature was extremely resilient to small arms fire." Russell said.

"I got this one to swallow a stun grenade." Washington said.

"Then we'll take better weapons. Master Sergeant did you load any grenade launchers aboard the Eagles?" Koenig asked.

"Yes sir. Three per Eagle. Just in case." Washington answered.

"Then that gives us enough for a squad of men plus you and I and Professor Bergman." Koenig said and he turned to the Professor, "Assuming you're open to coming with us professor. That's an alien space station and your input on what is what in there might come in useful."

"Of course." Bergman replied, "I'm happy to help."

"Do you know how to use a grenade launcher professor?" Washington asked.

"I believe I load it, point it and pull the trigger until it goes 'pop' and then make sure to duck before the grenade goes off." Bergman replied with a smile.

"The professor was in the GDF reserve in college." Russell commented.

"I'll give you a quick refresher when we pick up the gear." Washington said.

"I want the last launcher issued to a sentry to be positioned at the *Ultra's* air lock." Koenig said, "We need to keep this ship secure at all costs. Doctor if you do manage to discover anything from this sample about these creatures then let us know immediately."

"Major Carter do you have access to the flight systems?" Kano radioed but in the cockpit all of the instruments needed to pilot the *Ultra* remained inactive.

"Sorry Kano, everything's still dead in here." Carter replied.

"We've got lights and mains power." Fraser pointed out.

"Then it must be the data link between the main computer and the cockpit. That means I need to trace the wiring to find the fault." Kano said.

"And how much of that is there aboard this ship?" Fraser asked, looking at Carter.

"Well there's about fifteen kilometres of wiring in an Eagle. Multiply that by about ten to reflect the relative size of an Ultra-class patrol ship and you've probably got your answer." Carter replied, "Kano where is the main computer?"

"Just forward of the tail section." Kano told him, "Do you have a floor plan on your tablet?"

"Yes, I've got it right here." Carter said, taking out his compact tablet and calling up the floor plan loaded onto it.

"Section six fourteen." Kano said and in the cockpit nodded.

"Okay I've got it. I'll go and check it out." Carter said, "Fraser stay here and let me know if anything changes with the controls." then he got up out of the pilot's seat and made his way out of the command module.

Following the floor plan on his tablet Carter made his way back through the *Ultra's* main module. As he made his way to the section of the ship that held its main computer Carter heard voices.

"Hello?" he called out, wondering who would already be near the main computer.

"Major Carter?" a voice responded and from the doorway of a room ahead one of the soldiers brought along from Alpha leant out.

"What's going on down here Haley?" Carter asked.

"Powell and I were told to keep an eye on that guy from the ship's crew." the soldier told him.

"And what's he doing down here?" Carter said as he walked up to the doorway and peered past the soldier to where Powell stood beside a small hole in the wall.

"It looks like he's been living down here major." Haley said, "He's taken off an access panel and built himself some quarters behind the wall. The colonel thinks that its a way of keeping safe from those things on the station. The way in is too small for them to get through.

"Smart." Carter commented then he looked at his tablet before looking back at the hole leading to Cellini's hiding place, "Although I think he's messed things up for us somewhat."

Walking over to the open access panel, Carter crouched down and peered inside where he saw the mess of scattered objects and Cellini curled up in the corner on his bed.

"Hey guys take five, okay?" he said, looking up at the soldiers, "I need to get in there and he might be easier to deal with without the pair of you waiting out here with rifles."

"Yes major." Haley responded and the two soldiers exited the room, leaving Carter alone.

"Hey Lieutenant this is a pretty good place to keep out of the way." Carter said through the hole.

"They can't reach me here. You've brought one back. The others will know." Cellini said.

"Well you don't need to worry about that. Colonel Koenig and a team of men have gone to hunt down the creatures. They've got enough firepower with them to deal with anything." Carter said and Cellini lifted his head, looking straight back at Carter.

"They went back to the station?" he asked and Carter nodded.

"Yes they did. Eleven men with rifles and grenade launchers. From what I hear a stun grenade will blow the head off one of these creatures. A fragmentation round should shred them. The thing is I need to get in there and take a look around. You may have damaged some of the wiring from the main computer to the cockpit. We're going to need that if we're going to fly this ship back to the moon so how about you come out here while I check it out?"

Slowly Cellini began to crawl towards the entrance to his hiding place and Carter smiled as he pulled back to give the man room to come out through it.

"That's better." he said, helping Cellini to his feet, "Now hopefully by the time Colonel Koenig gets back with-"

"No!" Cellini screamed suddenly and he swung his fist at Carter. Without his spacesuit helmet on Carter was struck on the side of his head and slammed into the wall beside him before collapsing unconscious to the floor. Cellini promptly reached down and took the pistol from Carter's holster and then ran from the room with it in his hand.

Cellini knew that Doctor Russell and a few other members of the salvage team were located in the *Ultra's* living quarters so he avoided this area as he headed for the air lock connecting the ship to the alien space station. Along the way he studied the weapon he had taken from Carter's holster. The magnetic accelerator pistol was more advanced than the weapons he had been trained to use more than four decades earlier but the basic functionality remained the same and so Cellini had no difficulty in finding the control that adjusted the muzzle velocity of the projectiles it fired and he turned this down, reducing it to subsonic. With no explosive compound needed to launch the pistol's ammunition and no sonic boom, the pistol would be almost totally silent when fired.

Hearing voices from the air lock, Cellini paused to peer around the last corner before he reached it and as he had expected he saw a pair of soldiers on guard. Both men carried magnetic accelerator rifles, one of which had a grenade launcher mounted beneath it. Of more importance to Cellini was what they wore though. The spacesuits worn by the soldiers featured numerous rigid armour plates that would easily stop a subsonic pistol round even if the muzzle of the weapon was placed right against them. However, although they both still wore their helmets they had raised the faceplates so that they would not deplete their suits' life support systems. Tucking his stolen pistol into his jacket pocket Cellini walked around the corner and straight towards the two guards.

"Can we help you lieutenant." one of them said when they saw Cellini walking towards them.

"I must go." Cellini replied but the guards moved to block his path.

"Sorry sir but no-one is to leave the ship. Colonel Koenig's orders." the guard said and Cellini smiled and nodded.

"Of course." he said calmly before he suddenly drew the pistol from under his jacket and shot the guard in his face.

Startled, the other guard began to lift his weapon but despite his age Cellini was quicker and he spun around and shot the second guard as well. Cellini then paused only to pick the rifle fitted with a grenade launcher and then darted through the air lock into the corridors of the alien space station, leaving the bodies of the guards where they had fallen.

8.

Waiting in the cockpit with no sign of any change in any of the *Ultra's* systems Fraser decided to check on Carter's progress and took out his comlock.

"Major Carter I'm not seeing anything new here. Have you found the computer?" he signalled but there was no response, "Major Carter this is Captain Fraser, do you read me?" but again there was no reply and so Fraser decided to try contacting Kano instead, "Captain Kano do you read me?"

"Loud and clear Fraser." Kano replied.

"I can't contact Major Carter. Have you heard from him?" Fraser asked.

"Not since he said he was leaving you to check on the main computer. Has he got there yet?"

"I don't know. He hasn't checked in since leaving." Fraser said.

"I don't like the sound of that. I'm going to go and check it out myself. Maybe there's something shielding him from transmissions." Kano said before shutting off his comlock, "Stay here and keep working on the reactor," he told the other engineers who had come with him from the moon, "I'm going to go and find out what's happened to Major Carter."

Kano drew his sidearm as he made his way along the tail section of the *Ultra*. Even though the ship was considered to be secure a pair of soldiers had been left here to make sure that nothing happened to the Eagles that had brought the salvage team from the moon and when they saw that Kano had his weapon drawn they turned to face him.

"Problem captain?" one asked.

"Possibly. Major Carter hasn't returned to the Eagles has he?" Kano replied.

"No sir. We've not seen him. The last people through here were the colonel and the squad he and Master Sergeant Washington were taking aboard the space station." one of the soldiers replied and Kano nodded.

"Contact me if you see him. No-one seems to know where he is at the moment." Kano said and the soldier nodded at him as he walked past them and through the doorway leading to the *Ultra's* main module. Having studied the plans of the ship closely before leaving the moon, Kano knew that the computer Carter had been heading for was located close by and he headed through the storage area towards this, calling out as he got closer, "Major Carter? Are you there?" but there was no reply. Wanting to make sure that Carter was not in the main computer and just unable to hear him Kano continued towards the compartment where he knew the access point was located and looked inside. Then he gasped when he saw Carter sprawled on the floor and he rushed to him.

"Alan!" he exclaimed. Pressing a finger against Carter's neck he breathed a sigh of relief as he felt a steady pulse and then quickly took out his comlock, "Doctor Russell this is Kano, I've got a medical emergency in section six fourteen. Carter's been hurt."

"What happened?" Russell responded.

"I don't know. I just found him here unconscious. He's alive though and his pulse is steady." Kano told her.

Then he noticed Carter's empty holster, "And his weapon's gone."

"Hold on, six fourteen? That's where Cellini has been living. Is there any sign of him or the guards the colonel left to watch him?" Russell asked.

"No, sorry doctor. There's no-one else here."

"Okay I'm on my way. Call me if there are any changes before I get there." Russell said before she turned off her comlock.

Kano then picked up his sidearm from where he had put it down and looked around, anxious not to be surprised by whatever had seemingly attacked Carter.

Russell arrived soon after with her medical kit in her hands and she set it down beside Carter before beginning to examine him.

"I take it there's no sign of Cellini." she said and Kano shook his head.

"Him or the guards." he replied.

"Oh I found the guards. They said Major Carter ordered them to stand down while he tried to coax Cellini out of there so he could go in and check the computer connections." Russell replied.

"Speaking of which I could do with checking on them myself while you check on the major." Kano said and Russell nodded.

"Go." she said and Kano crawled through the open access panel into Cellini's hiding place.

Meanwhile Russell examined Carter closely. She easily found where he had struck his head against the wall but the injury looked minor and so she took a stimulant from her medical kit and injected it into Carter's exposed neck. For a few seconds nothing happened, but as the stimulant did its job he let out a groan and his eyes flickered open.

"Feeling better major?" Russell asked, smiling at him.

"What happened?" he replied as he sat up. Then he frowned, "Hang on, that Cellini hit me again. What's that guy got against me?"

Inside Cellini's hiding place Kano had to sweep aside some of the debris that had piled up over the years to get to the computer's signal line conduit and he saw that this had been ripped out of place, breaking the connections between the main computer and the Ultra's flight systems.

"This doesn't look good." he called out, "There must be hundreds of broken connections in here. I need to identify every one before I can remake it." then he noticed an object under the debris that was only partially visible and he reached out to pick it up, pulling it loose so that he could see the whole thing, "I think this may have gone from bad to worse." he said.

"What do you mean?" Russell asked, looking towards the access point just as Kano crawled out and then he reached back through to bring out what he had found.

"Look familiar?" he said, holding up a Dorcon rifle.

"Where the hell did he get that?" Carter said.

"My guess would be that Dorcon warship." Kano replied, "Although how I doubt that they gave it up willingly and how he managed to take it from them raises a few questions."

"He must have taken it after the creatures killed the Dorcons." Russell said.

"Which means he's been doing more here than just hiding in this hole and living off emergency rations for forty years." Kano said, "Wait here a moment." and then he leant the Dorcon weapon up beside the open access panel and went back inside Cellini's hiding place. Inside he began to look around again, this time paying careful attention to the items scattered all around and he found several that caught his eye. In his role as the head of Alpha's technical section, Kano had to have significant knowledge of many aspects of human technology and this meant that he could recognise when he saw a device that had not been made by human hands, "There's more." he called out as he picked up several more devices of alien manufacture than he then passed out through the hole. Another of the devices looked like a weapon, this one a pistol of some kind although its grip was clearly not made for a human hand, while most of the others looked more like computing or communication devices. Finally one of them defied all description based on a cursory visual inspection, looking something like a coiled seashell crafted from gold coloured metal and mounted to a rubberised cylinder that could have been some sort of handle.

"So he's been looting." Russell said.

"Maybe. Or maybe they're trophies." Carter suggested.

"Trophies? Trophies of what?" Russell asked.

"Did the colonel tell you about the damage to the command module door?" Carter said and Russell shook her head.

"No, he never mentioned it." she answered.

"Well it looks like Cellini survived by locking himself in the command module while the rest of the crew were killed. What if he's been luring visitors here to where the creatures are? Or luring the creatures to the visitors?" Kano said.

"I told him that Colonel Koenig had taken a party aboard the station to try hunting them." Carter said, "That's when he hit me."

"If he's not left the ship yet then maybe it's not too late." Russell said, reaching for her comlock, "This is Russell to air lock sentries." she signalled but there was no reply.

"We need to check the air lock." Carter said and Russell nodded.

"Yes and I need to warn John." she said.

9.

"This is the place colonel." Washington said when the squad of soldiers reached the elevator shafts where they had been ambushed by the alien creatures. As expected there were large splashes of the creatures' blood on the walls where Washington and his men had shot them but the largest of these was where Washington had decapitated one of them and leading away from this was a trail of blood that marked out where the creature had retreated to.

"And there's our trail." Koenig added, pointing at the floor before his comlock chimed, "Koenig." he said into the device without checking who was calling him.

"John it's Helena. Cellini is on the loose. He attacked Carter and killed the two men guarding the airlock. He has one of their weapons and we think that he's heading for you." Russell told him and Koenig frowned.

"Wait, I don't understand. What suddenly changed?" he asked.

"Carter told Cellini that you'd gone hunting for the creatures and that's when he went crazy. Kano checked the hiding place he'd constructed and found several items of alien manufacture that could only have come from the crews of those other ships. We think that Cellini may be using the creatures on the station to kill other visitors to it." Russell explained, "John he's clearly insane."

"Okay we'll keep an eye out for him. We've found a trail so we should be able to find the rest of the creature to go with the head Washington already brought back soon. I'll keep you up to date with whatever we find."

Koenig said before shutting off his comlock and turning to Washington, "Did you catch that?" he asked.

"Yes colonel. I'll put a man on our tail to watch for Cellini."

"Good. Now I suggest we get a move on. The faster we move the harder it will be for Cellini to catch up with us."

Washington took the lead as the squad began to follow the trail of blood left behind by the retreating creature but rather than coming across a headless corpse lying in a pool of its own blood after just a few metres they found themselves following a lengthy trail.

"The ability of this creature to withstand serious injury is impressive." Bergman commented.

"As long as they die when we want them to professor." Koenig replied.

"Look sir." Washington said suddenly and he came to a halt and crouched down, pointing ahead of them to where the corridor they were following opened out and the blood trail ended.

"Now that's damned peculiar." Koenig said and he took a chemical light stick from his webbing, activated it and then hurled it ahead of them. The light spun in the air as it fell and then rolled across the floor when it landed. The light cast upwards revealed that the open chamber ahead of them was overlooked by a landing of some sort and this offered an explanation of why the blood trail suddenly ended.

"The other creature withdrew up the elevator shaft." Washington pointed out.

"And now it looks like this one headed up as well." Koenig added.

"Perhaps their nest is that way." Bergman suggested.

"Colonel if we run into an entire nest of these things then we might have trouble dealing with them. We only have a few grenades each and our rifles barely slow them down." Washington pointed out.

"I'll bear that in mind master sergeant, but for now let's just find out what happened to this one." Koenig ordered.

"Movement!" the soldier watching behind the squad suddenly called out and the others all turned towards him. Looking back down the corridor they had just walked down the squad saw the body of one of the serpent-like alien creatures as it crawled past a junction they had come straight past, thus cutting off their route back to the *Ultra*.

"I don't like this." Koenig said, "It's like it knows that we need to go that way to get back to the ship." Koenig said.

"Look at the size of the thing. Amazing." Bergman added as he continued to watch the body of the creature crawling past without any indication of ending.

"This gives us an opportunity." Koenig said, "That thing's far too big to be able to turn around in these corridors. If we attack from the flank then it won't be able to fight back."

"Grenades colonel?" Washington asked.

"I think so. Just one for now. I want to see how effective they each are." Koenig told him and Washington took aim with his rifle, lifting it to his shoulder and lining up the grenade launcher's sight on the creature's impossibly long body. Squeezing the trigger he launched a single explosive projectile at the creature and this struck its body, detonating moments later. The blast from the grenade briefly filled the corridor with flames and as had been hoped blew a large hole in the side of the alien creature. Just as had happened earlier though, despite the severity of the wound the creature made no sound. Before a second grenade could be fired down the corridor to finish the task of splitting the creature in two it reversed its direction and pulled

back with incredible speed until its head appeared in the corridor and it turned towards the squad of soldiers. Koenig fired his own grenade launcher when he saw this and the explosive projectile blew the side off the creature's head, causing it to pull back again.

"Looks like its had enough." Koenig said, "After it. Maybe we can catch up with it as it dies." and the squad began to run after the retreating creature.

The path the injured creature took led them back towards the cluster of elevator shafts and unsurprisingly they were just in time to see it withdrawing up one of the shafts. However, before they could approach the shaft themselves another of the creatures emerged through one of the other elevator doors, followed by a second from another to block the squad's advance. Only one of these two creatures had the distinctive pointed head that all the others seen had possessed, though this appeared to have suffered some injury of its own in the past and there was a large burned patch along one side. The other instead ended in what looked like a mass of misshapen tissue and instead of having a head raised up off the floor as it advanced this creature crawled along it flat as if feeling its way.

"Back." Koenig ordered and the squad retreated as far as the closest junction that they could use to duck out of sight.

"Could that one without a head be the one that swallowed my grenade?" Washington said, "How could it survive this long with no head?"

"I don't know sergeant. Perhaps if we can kill it this time Doctor Russell will be able to tell us." Koenig replied.

"Colonel do you suppose that it's just a coincidence that they were here to block our pursuit or do you think that other creature was able to communicate with them somehow?" Bergman asked.

All of a sudden both of the creatures turned towards the squad and as the headless one shot straight towards them the other headed off down a different corridor.

"Shoot it!" Koenig yelled and the squad emerged from behind the corner so that as many of them as possible could get a clear line of fire at the oncoming creature. They fired their rifles rather than the grenade launchers underneath them, not wanting to risk any of the explosive projectiles being deflected back at them if they hit the charging creature head on and bounced before detonating. However, with their rifles set to fully automatic they were able to fire hundreds of projectiles at the creature in a very small space of time and the combined effect of these blew chunks of flesh from the creature's body and sprayed blood across the walls and ceiling. However, despite this damage the creature kept coming towards them.

"Colonel we can't hold this position." Washington said.

"I know. We'll fall back to-" Koenig began but as he looked over his shoulder to check that the corridor was clear for them to retreat down the beam from his helmet mounted flash light illuminated Cellini standing at the far end of the corridor, a rifle in one hand at his side and something else held high in the other, "Cellini!" he called out and the man at the end of the corridor turned and ran out of sight, "After him, we have to catch him. He killed our people and he might be able to give us some answers."

The squad immediately began to fall back, the soldiers alternating between firing and moving as they went while Koenig and Bergman concentrated on giving chase to Cellini. However, the exertion was more than Bergman could tolerate for long and he came to a stop, bending over and steadying himself against a wall.

"Professor, are you okay?" Koenig asked.

"I'll be fine colonel. My heart isn't up to all this chasing around though. Keep going. I'll make sure Sergeant Washington and his men know which way you went." Bergman replied and Koenig hesitated, unsure about leaving the older man on his own before he turned again and continued his pursuit of Cellini.

Bergman was not the only one to be suffering the effects of age and ill health though and Cellini also found himself short of breath as he tried to outrun Koenig. However, he had the advantage of local knowledge, having had four decades in which to explore the space station and he knew just where to stage an ambush. Leading Koenig towards a large open gallery that was split between multiple levels and he made his way up a flight of stairs to where he could take cover behind what had at one time been a plant bed before the contents had died and rotted away. Now it offered something to rest the weight of his rifle on while he waited for Koenig to follow him into the gallery.

Unaware of the trap Koenig rushed into the gallery with his rifle against his shoulder, ready to fire and it was then that Cellini fired the grenade launcher mounted beneath the barrel of his stolen rifle. Had he fired the rifle itself then he would most likely have hit Koenig before he even knew that he was under fire but the grenade launcher made things much different. Not relying on a physical impact to inflict damage, the explosive projectile moved much more slowly and it was large enough that Koenig just about noticed it as it came flying towards him and this gave him the chance to dive out of the way. Added to this the projectile did not explode on impact when it hit the floor just behind Koenig, instead it bounced upwards and flew a short distance further before it exploded in the doorway of the gallery close to the ceiling. The force of this was enough to bring down a section of the ceiling, creating a hole up to the level above and blocking off the doorway Koenig had just used to enter the gallery. On the other hand Koenig himself was just beyond the blast area when the grenade went off and his helmet protected him from the concussive force unleashed.

Although he could not see Cellini clearly in the gloom of the gallery, Koenig knew roughly where the grenade had come from and before Cellini could switch to his rifle and fire again Koenig pointed his own weapon upwards and pulled the trigger, sending a stream of magnetically accelerated projectiles towards Cellini. None of the projectiles managed to hit him, Cellini ducking behind the planet bed as they struck it instead but the burst of suppressive fire did give Koenig the chance to find cover of his own behind an alien computer terminal of some kind while he ejected the now empty magazine from his rifle and reloaded it before turning off the flash light mounted on the side of his helmet. Without this light the only sources of light in the gallery now came from a handful of illuminated keypads on control panels and this limited visibility to nothing more than vague outlines among the darkness. With his flash light no longer giving away his position Koenig was confident enough to emerge from his hiding place and rush towards a carved stone column he had noticed nearby and he waited there to see what Cellini would do next.

On the floor above Cellini cursed his luck. He had not thought to spend time going through the equipment of the soldiers he had killed and so had taken only the one grenade and magazine of rifle ammunition loaded into the weapon he stole. The grenade was now spent and he knew that if he used the rifle ammunition frivolously then it would rapidly run out as well. However, despite having limited ammunition available, the rifle did offer Cellini another benefit. Like most GDF rifles it was fitted with an optical sight that was capable of functioning as an image intensifying night sight. Therefore, when looking through this sight he could see what he was aiming at quite clearly even if this only covered a very narrow angle. Using this he began to hunt for Koenig.

Meanwhile Koenig had used the sight on his own rifle to confirm Cellini's position and was looking for somewhere that would give him a better firing angle while also offering him cover from any return fire should he miss. If he could get close enough to Cellini then he would be able to use his stun gun to incapacitate the man instead but Koenig did not intend to risk his life in a headlong charge just to get in range of his sidearm. Spying a staircase nearby Koenig made a dash for it but as he leapt up and started to run he kicked a piece of debris that had probably lain undisturbed for decades and the sound of this striking a wall echoed around the gallery.

Immediately upon hearing this Cellini swung his rifle around and fired a rapid burst that only narrowly missed Koenig before he dived and rolled behind the staircase. Cellini cursed at having fired before his rifle was properly aimed and to avoid wasting any more ammunition he flicked his weapon's selector to the semi-automatic position before he tried to relocate Koenig, knowing that he had gone behind the stairs.

Leaning out from under the stairs Koenig fired at Cellini before he could take aim, forcing him to take cover instead and Koenig fired several rapid bursts as he rushed up the stairs and then hid in an alcove. As soon as the gunfire stopped Cellini emerged from cover once again and searched around the stairs, not realising that Koenig was now on the upper floor with him. Koenig watched this through the sight of his rifle. There was a large display unit of some kind between the two men that although transparent was an obstacle that Koenig knew could affect the path of any bullet fired through it. The heavy looking base section of this display unit did appear to offer reasonable cover though and its location was also good for firing at Cellini's position. However, the proximity to Cellini meant that he would hear Koenig running and that meant that he was likely to come under fire if he did just rush straight for it and moving more slowly would give Cellini more time to find him by chance.

Remembering the debris that had given his position away just a few minutes earlier Koenig looked around and even in the darkness he saw a short length of metal pipe that looked to have fallen from a nearby wall that was just within his reach. Picking this up he hurled it across the gallery in an arc that took it well over Cellini's line of sight so that when it landed in the lower gallery it was on the other side of Cellini to Koenig. The sound of this landing was enough to make Cellini turn and he fired another wasted shot before realising that there was nothing there. However, convinced that it was Koenig that had made the noise he continued to search for him in that direction. Meanwhile Koenig got down on his stomach and began to crawl forwards towards the display unit.

Frustrated at his inability to locate Koenig, Cellini got up and dashed towards an ornate column covered in carvings of alien writing that ran from the floor to the ceiling. Koenig paused when he heard the movement and used his rifle's sight to see what Cellini was doing. It was obvious where Cellini was heading and Koenig knew that if he got to the column he would be a much harder target. However, while on the move Cellini was only partially obscured by the plant container he had been hiding behind and Koenig took the opportunity to open fire. Cellini was struck in his side by part of the burst and cried out in pain as he fell but Koenig could tell that the man was still alive from the sound he continued to make. Getting quickly to his feet, Koenig rushed onwards to make sure that Cellini would no longer be a threat to his team.

Cellini himself did not give up after being shot, he had dropped his rifle when he fell and despite the pain from the bullet wounds in his side he pulled himself across the floor until he could reach the weapon and grabbed hold of it again. Pulling the rifle back to himself Cellini adjusted the fire selector back to fully automatic and turned it in Koenig's direction, using the sound of his footsteps to guide his aim. Cellini

screamed as he fired, spraying bullets from the magazine until the weapon was emptied and Cellini breathed rapidly as he looked into the darkness to try and determine the effect of his shooting. Seeing nothing Cellini slowly began to get back to his feet, wincing as he used his now empty rifle to support himself.

This was what Koenig had been waiting for, drawing his stun gun so that he could try and take Cellini alive and when the injured man stood up Koenig also got to his feet and turned his flash light back on.

"Cellini!" he yelled, "It's over. You're under arrest."

"No." Cellini responded, shaking his head, "Not me. Not me. Not when I can still call down the demons of this place on you." and from under his jacket he produced an object that looked as if it had been grown rather than manufactured and held it up, "Come to me! I summon you to come me now and kill Koenig!"

"Don't be a fool Cellini. Come with me now and let Doctor Russell take a look at that wound. There's no need for you to die here all alone." Koenig said but Cellini just laughed and moments later there was a loud 'crash' from the doorway blocked following the grenade as the head of one of the alien creatures burst through and raised itself up to be level with Koenig and Cellini.

"Yes, kill Koenig. I command it. I gave you my crew, I gave you the others and now I give you Koenig." Cellini cried out, stepping forwards so that he was between Koenig and the creature. However, the creature itself just swayed from side to side without moving forwards at all and Cellini scowled, "Very well, if you will not kill him then I shall do it myself." and letting go of the rifle he had been using for support he drew the pistol he had stolen from Carter instead.

"Don't do it Cellini." Koenig warned him but Cellini still began to turn with the weapon in his hand and before he could take aim Koenig fired his stun gun. The energy blast struck Cellini in the chest and he gave out a scream before he collapsed in a heap, both the pistol and the alien object falling from his grasp.

At that moment the creature struck, its head lurching forwards towards Cellini and it opened its mouth wide to swallow him whole. Koenig took advantage of the momentary delay while the creature was killing Cellini and he unslung his rifle again, aiming it right at the creature's head. Remembering what Washington had said about decapitating the other creature Koenig waited for it to open its mouth again and fired his grenade launcher. However, the shot was slightly off target and instead of going down the creature's throat it bounced off the side of its head and detonated against a wall. Some of the shrapnel still hit the side of the creature but it did not react. Knowing that he would not have enough time to reload his grenade launcher before the creature struck Koenig fired the rifle instead, hoping that by targeting the mouth he could drive it away.

"Fire in the hole!" Washington's voice suddenly called out and then Koenig heard the sound of multiple grenade explosions as Washington and his squad fired a volley of grenades at the part of the creature that was in the corridor leading to the gallery. These had the desired effect of severing its body and the head suddenly collapsed as the bloody stump retreated back up through the hole in the corridor's ceiling created by Cellini's grenade earlier. After the creature had retreated Washington and his men came charging into the gallery and began to spread out.

"Colonel Koenig are you here?" Bergman shouted as he followed the soldiers.

"Up here professor." Koenig responded, walking to the edge of the landing he was standing on and holding his rifle above his head, "And might I add that your timing is impeccable."

"Where's Cellini?" Washington asked and Koenig looked at the large length of the alien creature that lay along the length of the gallery.

"He might still be in there but I'm in no mind to try digging him out." Koenig told him. Then he bent down to pick up the alien device that Cellini had held up and threw it towards Bergman, "He had this professor. See what you make of it."

Bergman failed to catch the device and had to pick it up off the floor but when he was able to look at it more closely he smiled.

"This was made by the same aliens who attacked Earth colonel. The same one that made this place and created Maya's people. In fact it is related to them closely." he said as Koenig was walking back down the stairs to join the others on the gallery's lower level.

"You know what it is then professor?" Washington asked and Bergman nodded.

"I think so, yes. I've discussed them with Maya. We recovered a number from the Dorcon troops who attacked the moon, witnesses say that they pointed them at people as if they expected them to have some disabling effect on them." Bergman said.

"So it's a weapon." Washington said.

"Not quite sergeant. This device was designed to give the aliens who created Maya's people control over them. Maya told me that they are made using brain tissue from a strong female Psychon, one like Maya who is capable of influencing the actions of others. It gives the wielder the same ability over the Psychons themselves." Bergman told him. Then he looked at Koenig, "All this was in my report to you about the technology we recovered from the Dorcons." he added.

"Yes, I thought so. I just thought I'd have you take another look at it. Cellini acted as if it would give him control over the creatures." Koenig replied.

"I take it that it didn't?" Bergman said.

"One came when he called it but it wouldn't follow his orders. I'm guessing that he didn't know how to use it properly. Luckily for me." Koenig said.

"Colonel this is significant. It suggests that the creatures living here are not creations of natural selection, but of genetic engineering."

"In that case our objective is clear. We need to find the lab where they were created and make sure that no-one can recreate them elsewhere. I hate to think of what these things could do if they reached an inhabited planet." Koenig said, "Any ideas where that might be professor?"

"Well I'm a physicist rather than a biologist but many animals tend to return to places they find familiar. If I had to guess then I'd say that they would be nesting close to where they were created. I suggest that we keep following their trail and see where it leads us to." Bergman said.

"Colonel all these creatures head upwards when they retreat, the elevator shafts, holes in the ceiling." Washington said and Koenig nodded.

"Yes, that does suggest that they are nesting somewhere above us. Perhaps it's time to head upstairs ourselves." he said.

10.

There were exits from the upper floor of the gallery that allowed the squad to quickly get to the hole that the creature had retreated through without needing to climb through it and risk being injured by the sharp, protruding metal around the edge. As expected there was a large blood trail leading away from the hole and the squad immediately began to follow this as it led away. However, just as with the earlier trails they had followed there was no sign of the rest of the creature, indicating that it too had somehow managed to survive the serious injury inflicted on it.

"Get back!" Washington said suddenly when he rounded a corner at the start of the squad and pulled back around the corner while the rest of the squad came to a halt.

"Another one of them?" Koenig asked.

"More than one colonel. I can see the one we've been following and I think two others." Washington told him.

"Let me see." Koenig replied, moving forwards and leaning around the corner. There he saw that the body of one of the creatures crossed the corridor he was looking down at a junction where the head of a second appeared to be excreting some sort of bile onto the injured stump of the creature the squad had been tracking from its blood trail, "Now that's weird." he said and he took out his comlock, "Doctor Russell I think I have something for you." he transmitted.

"What? Have you found the rest of the creature Washington's men killed?" Russell responded.

"No, I don't think it's even dead. Take a look at this, I'm sending you a video." Koenig told her and then he held the comlock around the corner and activated its camera so that Russell could see the creatures Koenig and Washington had been watching.

"Fascinating." she said, "There must be something more to their biology than we know. Whatever that one is secreting is probably some aide to healing but it doesn't explain how the creature is supposed to survive without its head. Unless another will develop from the wound perhaps. Unfortunately without a complete specimen to study-

"Helena, I don't think that one of these things would make a very good pet." Koenig said, "Hopefully the fact that there are three of them together right here means that we're getting close to the nest. I'll let you know what we find there. Koenig out." then as he put his comlock away he turned to the rest of the squad and added, "Right, let's see if we can find an alternate way around them. If we are near the nest then the last thing we need to do is start antagonising them or we could attract the attention of them all."

"What about that gadget that the professor's carrying colonel? Couldn't we use that to try and get them out of the way?" Washington asked.

"I wouldn't advise that colonel." Bergman said to Koenig, "We know what the device is but we don't know much about its use. We might end up just calling attention to ourselves."

"I agree." Koenig replied, "Cellini had that thing for decades and he still couldn't control one of those things. I don't want to be experimenting on a nest full of them. Any suggestions for how to get around them professor?"

"As a matter of fact I might just have one colonel." Bergman replied, "You see I've noticed that this station appears to be constructed as a series of concentric circles connected together by a number of primary corridors running between each successive ring. We've been moving steadily towards the core of the station since we left the *Ultra* so if we head directly away from those creatures then we should be able to reach another linking corridor and take that one to get us closer to the next ring towards the core of the station. Then we double back until we find those creatures again and see if we can tell where the nest is from there." "Sounds like a plan to me. Okay everyone, head that way until we find one of these connecting corridors."

Koenig ordered.

With two of them continually checking that the creatures around the corner were not following them, the squad moved directly away from them. They moved quickly until they came to another junction barely a minute later and Washington held up his fist for them to halt again.

"It's another one colonel. I think we're boxed in." he said as they looked at the body of the creature that was visible ahead of them across the junction.

"Colonel that creature appears to still be moving away from the core of the station." Bergman commented as he studied the motion of the creature's body, "I don't think that it is aware of our presence. Perhaps its sensory organs are all located near the head."

"Are you saying that we might be able to sneak around it professor?" Koenig asked.

"Possibly. Of course I'm-" Bergman answered.

"Yes I know, you're a physicist, not a doctor or a biologist." Koenig interrupted, "Okay we'll give it a go. Master sergeant Washington and I will go first." and then he beckoned for Washington to follow him towards the corridor ahead of them and the creature it contained.

At about a metre across there was plenty of room either side of the creature's elongated body for Koenig and Washington to walk down the corridor without touching it as it continued in the opposite direction, seemingly oblivious to their presence and before moving out of sight Washington signalled his men by hand to follow as well. Moving in single file to keep clear of the creature beside them, the squad moved towards the core of the space station until they came to a junction where the corridor split off to the left and right. On the other hand the body of the creature continued towards the core, passing through a doorway into a darkened room. "I want to see what's in there." Koenig said and he crept forwards to the doorway and peered inside. The chamber on the other side of the doorway was vast and the beam from Koenig's flash light still illuminated only the body of the creature crawling through the doorway. To try and improve on this Koenig decided to risk using a chemical light stick and taking one from his webbing he activated it and hurled it into the darkness. This too could illuminate only a limited area but it was enough to reveal to Koenig the truth about what they faced aboard the alien space station and he gasped.

"Good God." he said and both Washington and Bergman rushed forwards to see what Koenig had found. Inside the massive chamber was the answer to why the tail end of the creature had never been seen and also to how they seemed able to survive injuries as catastrophic as decapitation. The salvage team was not facing a nest of multiple creatures, it was facing just one single gigantic living organism.

The light stick had hit the side of the creature's main body and landed beside it, illuminating its vast bulk. What Koenig and the rest of the salvage team had assumed were individual creatures were in fact nothing but tentacles, hundreds of which seemed to sprout at random from the creature's body while large white orbs with dark centres that had the look of eyes that occasionally blinked at random dotted the surface in between. As the tentacles moved around it became apparent that a number of them had suffered injury over the years, terminating in stumps rather than the triangular shaped tips with their rows of teeth.

"God had nothing to do with this colonel. The aliens who attacked Earth made this." Bergman said.

"What sort of insane fool would make this professor?" Washington asked.

"If ever we find any of them left then maybe we can ask them that." Koenig said.

"Still it explains why cutting off what we thought was the head didn't kill them." Washington added, "It's like trying to kill one of us by pricking our fingers with needles."

"Grenades sergeant?" one of the soldiers standing behind them asked.

"I doubt our grenades will be enough to kill that thing." Washington replied.

"No, we're going to need something bigger. A lot bigger." Koenig said.

"A missile strike from the moon could destroy this entire station." Washington suggested but Koenig shook his head.

"No, I've got a better idea. We need to get back to the Ultra though. We're getting out of here as quickly as we can." he said.

It was then that one of the gigantic creature's eyes noticed the humans clustered at the doorway, seeing the beams from their flash lights and all of a sudden the tentacle that ran through the doorway shifted sideways, knocking a pair of the soldiers over as it struck them. In response the other soldiers fired their rifles at the tentacle but it had no effect.

"Get them clear. We need to move." Koenig ordered.

"Colonel we can't go back that way." Washington said, looking along the corridor they had come down and see the tentacle now thrashing from side to side and banging against both walls. It was obvious that anyone who attempted to flee along that corridor would inevitably be crushed between the tentacle and the wall.

"Grenades." Koenig said.

"But I thought they were useless against that creature." Bergman said.

"Not against the creature professor. The floor, we'll blast a hole in the floor to get back to the level below."

Koenig said and he pointed his weapon along the corridor stretching out beside them and fired his grenade launcher.

The projectile bounced off the floor and travelled a short distance onwards before it exploded, followed rapidly after by another from Washington's weapon and a third from one of his men. This third explosion was enough to blast a hole in the floor large enough for a man in a space suit to fit through easily.

"Professor you first." Koenig said, "Watch the edges." and then he and Washington began to help lower Bergman down through the hole.

"Behind us!" one of the soldiers called out and Koenig looked around to see that the creature had sent another tentacle through the doorway after them and this was now coming down the corridor towards them. The soldiers did not wait for the order to fire before using their weapons, firing one burst after another at the tip of the tentacle in a bid to slow it down. The attacks had little effect though and the tentacle shot towards one of the soldiers, the end unfolding to reveal the rows of teeth. However, the soldier used this to his advantage and fired his grenade launcher directly into the maw moments before it bit down on him. The soldier cried out as the teeth bit down, finding gaps between the plates of his armoured space suit but then the grenade's fuse ran down and it exploded inside the tentacle. The blast ripped the end of the tentacle off

and it released its grip on the soldier who was immediately dragged free by two of his comrades. "Lower him down next." Koenig ordered, "Professor Bergman, let Doctor Russell know that we're on our way back and we have a casualty for her."

"Contact!" the voice of one of the two sentries left guarding the *Ultra's* air lock said as he broadcast a warning to the rest of the salvage team and this was followed by a burst of automatic fire. Hearing this Carter activated his comlock, setting it to broadcast to the rest of the salvage team as well.

"Hold that air lock." he ordered, "I want everyone not already assigned to a priority task to grab whatever weaponry they can and defend this ship." then as he put the comlock away again he turned and ran back to the tail section where the Eagles were docked. Climbing down into Eagle One he rushed into the passenger module and opened the arms locker just as a pair of technicians arrived.

"Captain Kano ordered us to come and help." one of them said.

"Good. Take one of these each." Carter replied as he removed a pair of short barrelled magnetic accelerator weapons from the locker and held them out. These weapons were designed to launch several projectiles simultaneously in the same way as a shotgun. At close range they could do incredible damage to an unarmoured target and Carter was hoping that, lacking any further grenade launchers, these would be sufficient against the alien creature's tentacles. Loading these weapons and taking several spare magazines of ammunition each, the three men then hurried to the air lock. Here they found all of the remaining soldiers firing their rifles into the space station where a total of three of the alien tentacles were pushing towards the *Ultra*.

"What's your status spaceman?" Carter asked one of the soldiers.

"This is the second wave major. We drove back two others but then these three appeared." the soldier responded as he reloaded his rifle, "Our ammo won't last long at this rate either." he added.

"Well let's see if these things have any effect." Carter said, holding up his weapon and then he leant around the frame of the *Ultra's* inner air lock door and fired three rapid blasts at the closest tentacle, still treating it as if it was the head of an independent creature. The three clusters of projectiles all struck their target and each one ripped away a patch of skin and flesh from beneath. Moving at a relatively low velocity, the round from Carter's carbine could not penetrate deep into the creature's tentacle but the effect of having such a wide area torn open simultaneously made the tentacle rise up, turning its injured side away from the humans defending their ship. The two engineers then fired together, aiming at the same tentacle that Carter had just shot at and more patches of flesh were ripped open by the clusters of projectiles. Unexpectedly this tentacle then rushed straight forwards, ignoring the streams of magnetically accelerated projectiles striking it from all sides as the soldiers continued to fire their rifles.

"Down!" Carter yelled and the troops defending the air lock all dived aside to get out of the tentacle's path. One did not move quite far enough though and the tentacle opened to bite down on his leg, dragging the screaming man back through the air lock to be set upon by another of the tentacles as well while the third pushed past them and towards the open air lock.

"Grenade!" a soldier yelled, tossing a stun grenade over the advancing tentacle in the hope that the explosion would make the other two release their victim and back away. The grenade was knocked against a wall before it detonated, the force of the blast being absorbed entirely by the already badly injured tentacle and this was enough to cause it to release its grip on the soldier and withdraw as the creature sought to protect the appendage.

All of a sudden there was another explosion from somewhere out of sight of the air lock and the advancing tentacle went limp and dropped to the floor, motionless. Two more explosions followed in rapid succession and then the remaining tentacles pulled back, leaving behind them the corpse of the soldier they had dragged from the air lock.

"Get him back in here." Carter ordered, "And be ready for another wave. Reload your weapons if you're running low."

"Koenig!" a voice called out from in the dark aboard the space station as the beams from the flash lights mounted on Koenig's squad's space suits appeared and then the shapes of the men in the squad themselves followed out of the darkness.

"Colonel, hurry up. There could be more of those things out there." Carter shouted.

"We know. We must have dodged or blasted our way through about a dozen of the things on our way here." Koenig replied as he ran up to the air lock, "Now where's Kano? I need to speak to him."

"Still working on the main computer colonel." an engineer answered at the same time as he stepped back to allow the two soldiers carrying their injured comrade to get past them.

"It's where Cellini was hiding. What happened to him anyway?" Carter asked.

"His luck finally ran out with that creature." Koenig said and then he pointed to the open air lock door, "I want that sealed. I don't care how you do it, just get it sealed. Carter, you're with me." and then he handed his rifle to one of the nearby soldiers along with the bandolier of grenades from across his chest and he began to

walk away, heading for the compartment where Kano was located.

Kano had removed several more wall panels to improve his access to the *Ultra's* computer core and when Koenig entered the room he was dragging a cable bundle from behind the wall out into the compartment itself.

"Colonel." he said when he saw Koenig, "I'm glad you made it back in one piece."

"Thanks captain. Now what is the state of the *Ultra*? Can she be flown?" Koenig asked.

"Barely. I can only give you half power on the fusion reactors." Kano answered.

"That might not get us back to Alpha in time colonel." Carter pointed out.

"What about the Orion drive? Is that working?" Koenig said and Kano and Carter exchanged glances.

"Yes it works. But colonel I can have the fusion drive working fully in a couple of hours, I'm sure. Then I'll be able to give you all the power needed to make full speed back to the moon." Kano said.

"We might not have a couple of hours of that thing keeps on coming at us." Carter commented.

"Plus we can do something with the Orion drive that we can't with the fusion drive." Koenig said.

"What's that colonel?" Kano asked.

"We can destroy the space station and hopefully take that thing with it." Koenig said.

"You want to nuke the station?" Carter said in surprise.

"Yes Major Carter, I want to destroy the station, alien creature and all. Obviously we'll lose any chance of gaining access to those other ships but that's a price I'm willing to pay." Koenig said.

"Well the Orion drive is a good way to go about it colonel. I'd recommend releasing a charge less than a hundred metres from the station for maximum effect. There's no atmosphere to carry a shock wave so we'll need as much heat from the blast to hit the station as possible and melt through its hull." Kano said and Koenig nodded.

"And how many charges will it take to get us up to full speed?" Koenig said.

"Two should be enough." Carter told him, "Then another two at the other end to slow us back down again."

"No. Kano once we're underway I want you to keep working on the fusion drive. I'd rather not be using the Orion drive too near the wormhole. The last thing we need is for the moon and the *Ultra* to be thrown through early. We saw what happened to the *Landau* when that got dragged into one along with us the first time. If we can't slow down using a steady burn from the fusion drive then we'll abandon ship in the Eagles instead but I still want to take the *Ultra* back to the moon if I can."

II.

Koenig was sat in the command position in the *Ultra*'s cockpit and Bergman took the communication officer's post while Carter and Fraser strapped themselves into the two flight stations when Washington rushed into the room.

"Colonel they're back. We can hear them hammering at the plates we welded across the air lock." he said.

"Are we ready to depart?" Koenig asked and Carter nodded.

"My panel says that we have a charge loaded." he replied.

"And can you disengage us from the station professor?" Koenig said, looking to his side.

"Assuming that it uses the same protocols for docking and departure as the alien ships already encountered do then yes colonel I can. Since the crew of the *Ultra* were able to dock and enter the station without having blast a way in then I think that that is a reasonable assumption." Bergman answered.

"What happens to the station when we disengage?" Fraser said, "Won't the whole thing decompress with all the doors open?"

"That would be one way of killing that thing. Assuming it needs air of course." Carter commented.

"I expect that the air lock door aboard the station will close automatically when we signal our departure."

Bergman responded.

"In that case I suggest we depart before that creature gets back aboard and leaves us with a hole in our ship. Professor Bergman, kindly disengage from the station. Major Carter manoeuvre us into position as soon as we are free." Koenig ordered.

"Sending disengage command now colonel." Bergman said and moment later Carter nodded.

"We're free colonel. Firing thrusters." he said and he began to pilot the *Ultra* away from the alien space station. The ship shuddered slightly as it began to move and Carter smiled nervously, "She's a bit bigger than what I'm used to." he commented.

As soon as the ship started to move away from the station air began to vent through the open air lock, dragging the ends of the tentacles that had attacked the metal welded in place to seal the *Ultra*'s own air lock out into space. Detecting the decompression, the space station's long unused emergency systems came back to life and activated to close the air lock door. The presence of the flailing tentacles was not enough to stop this and the force of the door closing cut through these, sending the ends spinning off into space.

"Heading set for the moon colonel." Carter said.

"Distance from space station one hundred and twenty metres." Fraser added.

"Captain Kano," Koenig said into his comlock, the *Ultra*'s intercom not yet functioning, "what is our engine status?"

"Fusion drive is about an hour from full operation colonel. Orion drive is available at your command. A nuclear charge is already in the firing chamber." Kano responded and Koenig looked at Carter.

"Major, you may engage the Orion drive." he said calmly.

"Yes colonel." Carter said, his finger reaching for the control to the *Ultra*'s Orion drive and raising the cover to expose the large red button, "Firing Orion drive in five. Four. Three. Two. One. Now." and he pressed the button.

Immediately the nuclear charge was propelled from the back of the ship and after it had travelled just under a hundred metres it exploded. By the standards of the nuclear weapons built by mankind over the years, the yield from this device was not large, measuring around fifty kilo-tonnes, but it was more than enough to overcome the mass and inertia of the *Ultra*. The energy of the explosion hit the thick, armoured pusher plate at the rear and the ship was hurled forwards, accelerating so rapidly that had the ship not possessed an artificial gravity field then the entire crew would have been killed instantly. The alien space station was even closer to the centre of the nuclear blast and the explosion burned through the space station's hull as well as those of several of the nearby alien craft docked there. The air inside the space station turned to fire as it carried the shock wave through the network of corridors and compartments, incinerating everything inside it as it went. Near the core the alien creature felt the pain of the tentacles that reached out towards the source of the nuclear blast for just long enough to register it before its own chamber became an inferno and its flesh was incinerated in an instant.

Meanwhile outside the space station the remains of the alien ships whose crews had been devoured by the creature tumbled away from the wreckage while the *Ultra* itself now coasted at high speed towards the waiting moon.

Koenig left the wall dividing his office from main mission open as Russell, Verdeschi and Kano sat in front of him.

"We've been able to access the logs from the *Ultra*." Kano said, "The ship's captain carried on making entries

right up until the end and they show that Cellini wasn't being entirely honest with us."

"Now there's a surprise." Koenig said sarcastically.

"He led the first group into the space station and was the only one to come back, raving about monsters. That was when the creature attacked the ship and Cellini locked himself inside the command module." Kano continued.

"So why didn't that thing just beat down the command module doors as well?" Verdeschi asked.

"The control device." Russell suggested, "If Cellini already had it then maybe he figured out how to make the creature leave him alone then. Certainly his having that explains how he avoided being killed all those years despite his mental state."

"Ah yes, that control device. What's happened to it?" Verdeschi asked.

"It's been secured with the others." Koenig said and then he looked at Kano, "Now what about the refit of the *Ultra*?"

"The *Ultra* is functional as she is colonel." Kano replied, "Although its weapons are somewhat outdated. Given adequate parts we should be able to update all of these within a month but-

"But that is another project that is competing for our already limited resources. Yes, I understand." Koenig interrupted.

"Even after an upgrade I doubt she'll be able to go toe to toe with a Dorcon warship." Kano added, "Although if she's carrying a flight of Hawks and is backed up by those two Osprey bombers we've got at Epsilon then she'll be something they can't ignore."

"We also need somewhere to house the ship properly." Verdeschi added, "The hangars at Alpha and Epsilon just won't cut it and all the ones at the space port at Eta were destroyed when the *Landau* crashed."

"No, Lambda is the only option." Koenig replied, "Again it's adding to an already overfilled workload but Lambda was intended to house larger ships when it was completed. Major Capston's people will have their work cut out to build us a suitable dry dock."

"Are you going to leave all the nuclear charges aboard?" Verdeschi asked.

"A few." Koenig replied, "Professor Bergman can't tell us exactly what effect using the Orion drive near the wormhole will have so I want the ship to operate using its fusion drive as much as possible. However, the Orion drive does give it a capability that may prove useful. For now though I want you to arrange to secure all the charges at Epsilon and do a better job of it than Gorski did at Mu. I don't want Red Mars destroying another base." Koenig said.

"Just keep Keynes away from them." Kano muttered.

"That just brings us to the creature itself." Koenig said, ignoring the comment so that the command staff in main mission would not realise what had been said, "Or at least what's left of it. Doctor Russell, what can you tell us?" he asked.

"Not much." she answered, "We now know that we only have a small piece of the creature. I did run some genetic tests though and I think that it was created using material taken from Earth. That might explain why the controller worked on it. Both it and the Psychons have a common origin."

"You're not saying that that thing started out human are you?" Koenig asked and Russell smiled.

"No. Although it's not impossible. The genetic sequencing of that creature was so heavily modified that it was impossible to say what it started out as." Russell explained.

"I did hear it said that we share fifty percent of our DNA with bananas." Verdeschi commented.

"In some cases it seems like the wrong fifty percent." Koenig added and the two men smiled at one another.

"Anyway I don't see the point in preserving more than a few tissue samples of what we have. I'd like to incinerate the rest." Russell said and Koenig nodded.

"Go ahead.. For all we know the creature could regrow from that piece. I know I'll sleep better knowing that its gone" he said.

Foxworth watched the news footage again, this time pausing it as the screen showed an image of the *Ultra* where it now rested on the surface of the moon close to Moonbase Alpha and he smiled.

"Colonel Koenig," he said to himself, "look at what you have brought me."